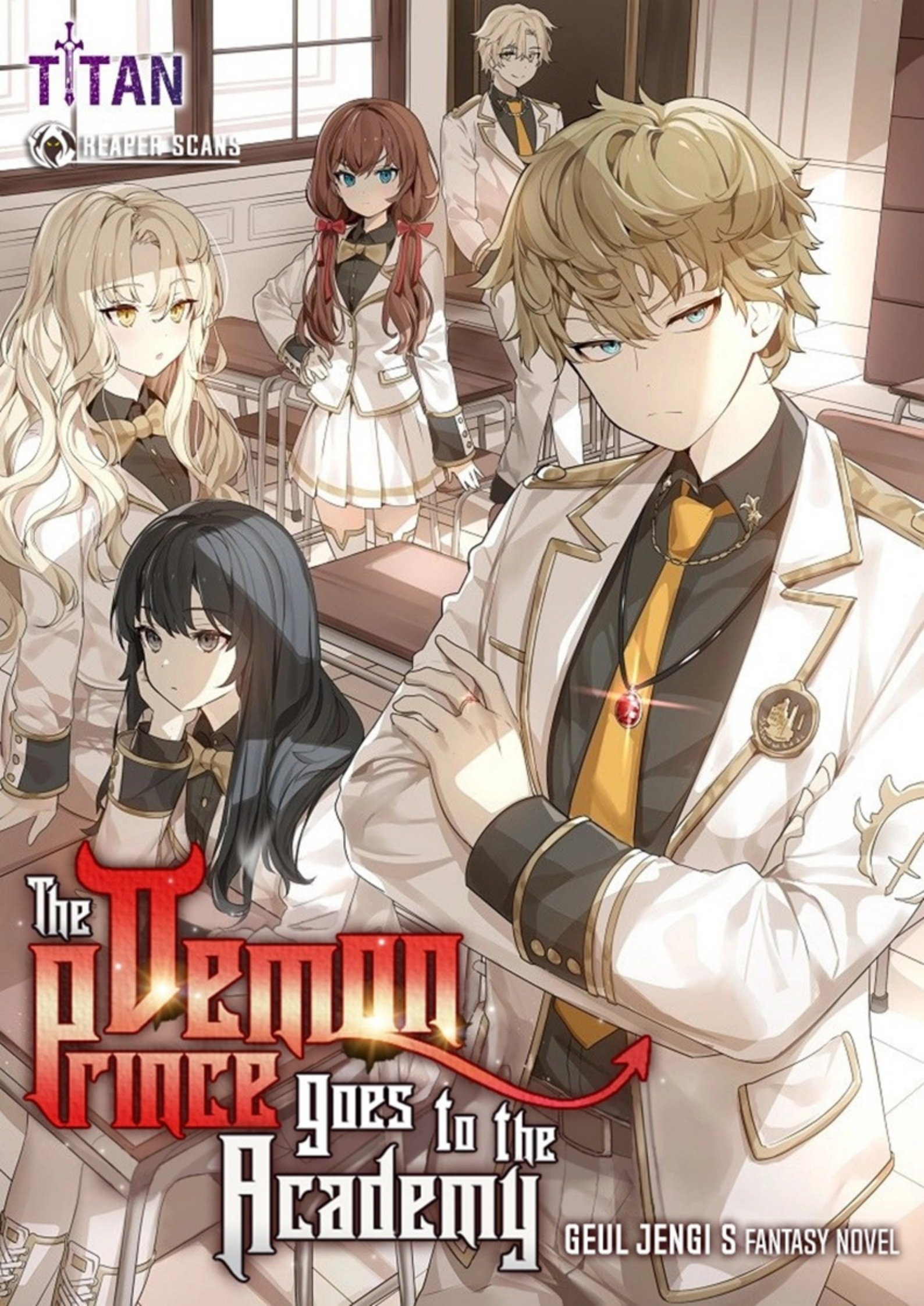
TITAN
REAPER SCANS
The Demon Prince goes to the Academy
GEUL JENGI S FANTASY NOVEL

THE DEMON PRINCE GOES TO THE ACADEMY

–마왕은 학원에 간다 –

- VOLUME 7 -

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[SUBUDAI11]

CHAPTER 301

“I can't show you.”

“Show us! Show us!”

Kono Lint felt like dying, biting his tongue as he heard the cries of the people in front of him.

'I've gotten myself into a stupid mess!'

The host, who knew nothing, thought it was something amazing because it was a superpower and asked for a demonstration, while the audience was excited to see the teleportation power of a Royal Class member.

If he suddenly teleported in just his underwear in this situation, the worst-case scenario would be the place turning into chaos, and at best, it would become a laughingstock.

There's a major flaw in his ability. That's why he can't show it.

He had to say that. It was already embarrassing to be in front of people like this, and he didn't want to do anything more humiliating.

People might want to see a skilled and flashy teleportation show, but what they would actually see is a pervert wearing only underwear teleporting here and there, which would undoubtedly be a dangerous scene!

That's right.

He had to say it.

“Show us! Show us!”

Kono Lint heard the cries directed at him, and saw the gazes focused on him.

Though he was standing in this embarrassing state, he saw their gazes.

They were gazes of admiration.

A look Kono Lint had never received before.

The subtle jealousy, envy, and admiration of people just because he was a Royal Class member.

The boy had never experienced it before.

In the Royal Class, his ability was long considered as a poor one.

-Hey! That's amazing!

-Soon you'll be able to teleport your clothes too, right?

-Congratulations, Lint…

When he could finally teleport his underwear with him, his fellow superpowered peers celebrated with him.

His ability was pitiful, but at least it had become slightly less pitiful, enough to receive support and praise.

He couldn't even dream of doing great things like Reinhardt, who kept achieving success with his powers.

Awakening his powers while fighting a senior.

Returning from Darkland after causing a huge commotion.

Awakening his mana reinforcement ability after a fight.

Winning the first-year tournament.

Those kinds of things.

He wasn't the one to do things that would leave everyone speechless and surprised.

But now, people were watching him.

Just for being a Royal Class member, just for being a superpowered individual.

There were even people whispering that he was cute.

For the first time in his life, he was getting attention. If he told them that he couldn't use his powers because his clothes would be stripped off, what would happen?

So, there's a useless guy like that in the Royal Class, huh?

Would their gazes change to that?

It was painful just to imagine their excited gazes turning cold.

A useless ability.

No, it's an incredible ability, but it's practically useless due to a significant flaw.

How long must I live like this?

Waiting to see what I can teleport along with my underwear, satisfied with such tiny progress. When can I become useful?

Kono Lint's ears feel distant from the people's shouts. The host's voice sounds like a distant echo.

Amidst countless gazes, Kono Lint feels utterly alone.

He doesn't want to be like Reinhardt.

That reckless guy only gets involved in dangerous situations.

He doesn't want to live like that, nor does he think he can.

He doesn't want to seek out danger like that guy with the annoyingly handsome face, but still…

Maybe a little.

Just like the world is strangely lenient with him.

Couldn't it be a little lenient with me too?

How long do I have to live this life, introducing myself as a Supernatural with a useless ability, unable to show it to anyone?

At least, he learned one thing from Reinhardt.

Sometimes, recklessness can bring results.

Recklessness doesn't always lead to failure.

For me, too.

There must be something prepared for me by the world.

And I know I won't grasp it unless I try.

If a fruit grows on a tree, it will never be mine unless I take the risk of climbing the tree.

"Show us!"

Kono Lint regains his sense of reality after a short but long period of contemplation.

The boy has made up his mind.

His classmates, who used to mock him, are now turning pale. They must have read something in his determined expression.

"No, don't!"

Especially Liana de Grantz, who had enjoyed this the most, shakes her head and cries out. She isn't an inherently evil person, but she wants to stop him from crossing a point of no return.

"No."

But Lint can't hear anyone else now.

I have decided to do it.

Even if I fail, there comes a time when I must move forward.

"Show us, senior!"

It's not because of the cute middle school girl in the front row who squeals.

"Lint, if demonstrating is difficult, you can show us something else…"

It's not because of the annoying host either.

"Show us!"

It's not because of the countless envious gazes.

"Don't do it!"

It's not for anyone else.

For himself.

He's fed up with this stagnation.

So, although he can't live like Reinhardt, he decides to follow the way that guy achieved things until now.

There are situations where he can't back down, and this is one of them.

Kono Lint pushed himself to the limit to advance to the next stage. If he failed, he'd be utterly humiliated. But if he succeeded, he wouldn't have to live as a nobody anymore. There was no situation more extreme than this. He had to do it, so he would.

"I'll show you something," he announced.

The crowd roared in excitement as Kono Lint, wearing a one-piece outfit, focused his eyes. He planned to teleport with his clothes, finally mastering his ability and stepping onto the path of a true Supernatural. His destination was the right side of the stage.

Using his ability was easy; the problem was that he couldn't overcome the penalty.

He still didn't know how, but he resolved to awaken the true potential of teleportation in this extreme situation.

With his hands together, Kono Lint let out a powerful yell. In an instant, silence filled the auditorium. He had successfully teleported.

The audience gasped in shock, as did the host. Even his Royal Class peers were stunned by the unexpected scene. It wasn't their expressions at discovering the predicted side effect; it was amazement at something completely unforeseen.

Kono Lint was also wide-eyed. He had definitely teleported successfully, but his body remained in its original position. Only his clothes had moved.

Kono Lint had teleported all his clothes except his underwear to the right side of the stage. He was left standing there, bewildered, as were his classmates.

Kono Lint's ability had evolved. What had just happened was miraculous. Those who knew him understood that his ability had undergone a near-miraculous transformation, surpassing mere improvement.

"Is teleportation… like this?" he stammered.

"Well, no, it's not…" the host said, equally confused. But everyone else had no choice but to believe that Kono Lint's teleportation ability was originally like this.

Instead of teleporting himself, he had teleported the clothes he wore. Kono Lint had achieved a miraculous development in his abilities.

But in the end, it was still the same result: he was nearly naked except for his underwear. The crowd went wild.

"That was contestant number one, Kono Lint!" The host exclaimed as Kono Lint fled to the backstage, leaving the confused audience and students behind. It took some time for the chaos to settle down.

"What… what did I just see?" Liana de Grantz muttered, dumbfounded. Her reaction was partly due to Kono Lint's sudden underwear display but also because he had used a completely different ability than before.

Heinrich, Cayer, and Erich were equally baffled. It was understandable for people who didn't know Lint to be shocked and stunned. After all, teleportation didn't necessarily mean that the person had to move.

However, those who knew Kono Lint were astonished to see that he had succeeded in transporting an object, instead of just moving his own body as he had always done before.

Although the end result was a comical scene with his clothes being transported, the ability itself had evolved to the point where it could be considered more than just a significant development.

People who didn't know the truth were shocked and made incredulous expressions, while some peculiar individuals found the flustered and fleeing Kono Lint cute.

But the four who knew the truth couldn't speak for a while, their mouths agape.

"Next, let's introduce contestant number two!"

The host tried to continue the competition to alleviate the chaos.

The four of them were initially present just to see Kono Lint's comical situation, but now that it was over, there was no need for them to stay.

Of course, there were still the voting process to determine the winner after all contestants were introduced. However, that was something they could either participate in or not.

Although there had been a shocking result, their main task was over, so there was no reason to stay.

However, the four from the Royal Class and the other people couldn't leave easily.

"What did you prepare for your appeal time?"

"I will show you a dance."

The contestants' antics were amusing, and people couldn't help but watch. Both

those who were forced to participate and those who seemed to have volunteered provided some entertaining sights.

"Hey, what's that? What is it?"

"Ah! Ah! It's funny, hey, why did you hit me?"

The shock from Kono Lint's incident was momentary, and Liana de Grantz laughed while hitting Erich sitting next to her.

"No, shouldn't you shave your leg hair before coming up?! Ah!"

Liana laughed while hitting the person next to her.

"This is crazy… Ah, my stomach hurts."

There were various acts, such as dancing, singing, and suddenly performing martial arts.

When a cross-dressing music major who looked quite good in women's clothing completed a sonorous baritone solo, everyone was dumbfounded and clapped.

As the cross-dressing contest continued, Liana suddenly seemed to remember something and clapped her hands.

"That's right!"

"What, what is it… Are you going to hit me again?"

Erich, who seemed to have been trained in the meantime, flinched when Liana's eyes lit up with a thought.

"That's right! That's right! You know what!"

-Clap clap clap!

Of course, she really did hit him again.

"Ah, why do you keep hitting me…"

Liana hit Erich's shoulder a few times and then spoke while looking at the hopeless trio.

"There was a strange kid in the waiting room earlier."

"A strange kid?"

Erich asked, and Cayer's expression became odd.

"If there's someone in that group who doesn't look strange, that would be even weirder, right?"

That was true.

In a waiting room filled with people who were enthusiastic about cross-dressing, someone who didn't look strange would be even more bizarre. In a place full of strange people, the normal ones are the oddities.

"No, I mean there was an incredibly pretty one!"

Liana struggled for a moment before choosing a rough expression.

"…?"

"…?"

"…?"

Liana used the intense expression of an incredibly pretty one.

Naturally, given the context, it must be a male. Liana recalled the strange one she had forgotten about due to the earlier shock and tilted her head.

"I think it was number 40."

Liana seemed to want to stay until then, just out of curiosity, and the other classmates also became curious since Liana was talking so much about it.

Just how pretty could he be?

It was simply curiosity.

What would they do if a guy dressed as a girl turned out to be that pretty?

All three didn't understand why they were still sitting there, but they didn't leave their seats.

"Now, introducing participant number 24, Richard Howlman!"

"…"

"…"

"…"

Everyone wanted to cover their eyes at the sight of a two-meter-tall, muscular man in a dress, and the host also looked drained.

"…I want to leave."

Liana had seen it before but grimaced as if her eyes were being violated.

"Uh, hmm, er… um… ah… yes…"

It was certainly unbearable to see such a muscular man in a dress, blushing and fiddling with the hem of the dress, crossing his legs.

After an agonizing conversation between the broken host and the embarrassed cross-dressed human tank, the host decided it was impossible to proceed any further and went straight to the appeal portion.

"What have you prepared for your appeal?"

"Squats, I'll show you."

Everyone watched with blank expressions as the human tank, dressed in a dress, suddenly performed heavy squats.

It was so hard to watch in many ways that many people started leaving during that part.

Amid the madness and laughter, the cross-dressing contest reached its final participant.

"Now, we've reached the final participant in the highly anticipated 8th cross-dressing contest. A last participant who will undoubtedly surprise you in many ways. We cannot reveal his real name as he requested anonymity. Participant number 40! Please come out!"

It wasn't only the unknown participant 40 who was anonymous. Quite a few participants had kept their class and name secret, so it wasn't that unusual.

Liana had seen them once before, and the other three spectators were curious about what they would look like based on Liana's words.

And then, the final participant.

The mysterious 40th participant slowly came up on stage.

"Wow…"

As the 40th participant walked under the highlight, the audience's reaction was nothing but dumbfounded admiration.

"What… what is that?"

"No way…"

"What… is this?"

The reactions of the Royal Class students weren't much different. Even Liana, who had seen him once before, was just staring blankly at number 40 with a dumbfounded expression.

The silver hair, reflecting the lights and shining brilliantly, was obviously a wig, but the strands were so full of life that it seemed like real hair.

Golden eyes, enchanting and delicate rosy lips, a beautiful jawline and facial features, and a clean, slender white neck.

Delicate shoulders, and although hidden by the dress, a perfect waistline.

On top of all that, a warm and gentle smile.

Thus, everyone couldn't help but have the same question in their minds.

Is that really a guy?

It's a lie.

"Uh, excuse me for asking, but… are you really a participant in the cross-dressing contest?"

"Yes."

In response, a subtle, androgynous voice.

Rather than cheers or admiration, everyone was simply dumbfounded. It was a feeling of disbelief, like "Is this even possible?"

"You requested to keep your identity secret. Is there a reason for that?"

There was a slight crack in the impenetrable expression, but number 40 quickly recovered.

“…Well, everyone has secrets."

"I see… Do you often dress like this?"

"…”

Number 40 stared at the host for a moment, responding to the provocative question.

Everyone briefly sensed number 40's real expression, but no one could see it properly. Number 40 quickly recovered their smile and answered with a grin.

"No, not at all."

"So, this is your first time?"

"Yes."

He seemed fine, but people were watching.

His expression appeared calm and collected, but number 40 was tightly gripping the hem of his dress.

It was clear that he was extremely nervous. His face was gradually turning red, and it was evident that he was very embarrassed by the situation.

CHAPTER 302

“So, is there a particular reason you decided to participate in the cross-dressing contest?”

“It's the money.”

“Ah, the prize money. Right, that makes sense.”

The host continued to ask uncomfortable questions. Contestant number 40 managed to handle them well enough at first, but as the questions persisted, his grip on the dress tightened.

As his embarrassment and shame intensified, Number 40's struggle became more apparent, and the crowd's expressions gradually grew more concerned.

In fact, his behavior wasn't much different from what human tank Number 24 had shown earlier. No, it was exactly the same.

But while people had been repulsed by Number 24's actions, they found themselves losing their minds at Number 40's identical behavior.

Is it because he’s cute that it's somehow okay?

Similar thoughts began to spread among the crowd.

“So, what do you plan on doing with the prize money if you win? Maybe buy another dress…?”

“…”

Of course, the host didn't stop his malicious questioning. Contestant Number 40's awkward smile in response was enough to garner sympathy from the crowd.

“Stop picking on him!”

“Yeah! Leave him alone!”

“Ask normal questions!”

Eventually, the audience started to criticize the host for making Number 40 uncomfortable. People had unknowingly become emotionally attached to Number 40.

“Oh dear, it seems I went too far. I apologize.”

“No, it's okay.”

The host began to ask about everyday life and hobbies. As the malicious questions disappeared, the silver-haired contestant calmly answered them.

Though it was the same question and answer session as before, people began to realize they didn't want this final round to end too soon.

“…I don't think I should watch this anymore."

Erich mumbled blankly.

They were starting to feel like they were heading into dangerous territory.

“…Right."

"…”

The other two male students didn't feel much different.

Liana would usually send a disdainful glance, but this time she couldn't.

"Why am I feeling jealous looking at a guy?"

Liana was also blankly mumbling.

“Well, let's move on to showcasing your talents…”

“Let's do it later!”

“You're doing it too soon!”

The audience even tried to stop the host's progress.

All Number 40 could do was laugh awkwardly at the audience's actions, but it only seemed to fan the flames.

“Well, it seems like contestant Number 40 has had a significant influence on many people's preferences.”

“I'm… sorry…”

“Oh, no need for you to apologize. But we can't delay any longer. We still have voting, and the contest needs to wrap up soon. So, what talent have you prepared?”

The host ultimately didn't grant Number 40 any more time.

“I'll sing.”

It wasn't anything new since many others had done the same. Of course, there was no accompaniment prepared, so everyone either sang a cappella or brought their own instruments.

Singing a song was a common talent, but everyone's eyes lit up at the news that Participant 40, who seemed to have many outstanding features and secrets, would sing.

“What song will you sing?”

“It's an original composition.”

“Oh, an original composition? Are you a music major?”

At the probing question, Participant 40 showed a subtle smile.

“Who knows?”

And so, Participant 40 sang during the appeal time.

Everyone was taken aback by the song sung in a soft voice.

It was a bizarre melody with lyrics about a woman weeding a bean field, something

they had never heard or seen before in their lives.

The participant introduced the song as "Chilgapsan."

It was strange and unusual, but it was a shocking style that had never existed in the Temple culture scene.

(*Chilgapsan is a heartwrenching song about a poor mom in Chilgapsan who marries off her young daughter. The song became so popular that a monument dedicated to it was built.

The lyric of Chilgapsan:

Dear woman who works in the field bean

Your clothes are are soaked with your tears

What makes you so sorrowful ?

Why do you plant the tears instead of bean ?

On the day I was getting married, leaving my mother alone

I could hear the birds crying

In the peak Chilgak mountain

Your tears burned my young weak heart

I could hear the birds crying

In the peak Chilgak mountain

Your tears burned my young weak heart

The sound of birds crying

in the peak Chilgak mountain

burned my young weak heart

Chilgapsan was originally released by Yoon Heesang in 1979, and then became a hit when Joo Byungsun released a remake of the song in 1989.)

After all the participants were introduced, it was time for voting.

All forty participants took the stage once again.

From Participant 1, Kono Lint, who showed off an unexpected underwear show with a shocking ability evolution hidden behind it, to the mysterious Participant 40 who seemed to be able to go straight to Miss Temple, everyone took the stage.

The results were evident without looking.

Everyone was staring blankly at Participant 40.

As they did, the poor Participant 40, whose face turned red and who was trembling with a forced smile, seemed to be on the verge of going mad with embarrassment.

Naturally, the song he sang was bizarre, but didn't this situation have a magical modifier that was attached to it?

Four-dimensional.

So, even when Participant 40 did something strange, it was understood as a kind of charm.

"Really… He must not have wanted to come out."

Everyone had no choice but to agree that Participant 40 was really struggling to endure this situation, regardless of whether it suited them or not.

The reason they came this far to a place they didn't want to go.

"But… how much money does he really need…?"

Money.

People had no choice but to guess that Participant 40 really needed the prize money.

They began to speculate amongst themselves.

"I don't know who he is, but he must have been really handsome. So, shouldn't he just go to Mister Temple?"

"Maybe he'll go to Mister Temple too."

"Oh, right."

If he won both the cross-dressing contest and Mister Temple, the prize money will be doubled.

The hearts of all the spectators who came to watch the competition came together.

The men were curious about what the guy really looked like.

The women were curious about how handsome the guy really was.

If he came to the cross-dressing contest because he needed money, he would naturally go to Mister Temple as well.

By going to the Mister Temple Contest, they might be able to find out the identity of that person.

While everyone was murmuring, the royal class students were alternately looking at Kono Lint and Participant 40.

Although Participant number 1's unexpected underwear show seemed to be forgotten, Kono Lint was filled with embarrassment and astonishment.

The situation left Kono Lint feeling a mix of embarrassment and happiness. He kept sending glances to his friends as if to say, "I did it!" but he couldn't help but look at contestant 40 more often.

"Hey, by the way."

"What?"

Erich de Lafaeri nudged Cayer's side.

"Doesn't that person keep looking at me?"

Erich was obviously talking about contestant 40.

“…Really? I thought he was looking at me."

"Wasn't it me?"

At Heinrich and Cayer's words, Liana scowled.

"What are you idiots talking about? He’s a man, right? If he’s looking at someone, it's me, not you guys."

All four seated in the audience believed that contestant 40 kept looking at them.

"Me, right?"

"Because it's me."

"Definitely me."

"No, obviously me. Seriously, what are you talking about?"

All four began arguing over a pointless issue.

In reality, they were all correct.

Contestant 40 would occasionally make eye contact with each of the four, quickly averting his gaze each time. It was no wonder that such thoughts were swirling in the boys' minds.

But still, he’s a man…

No, even so…

No, definitely not.

What if?

Could he actually be a woman?

Their minds were filled with bizarre thoughts, becoming increasingly confused.

Of course, contestant 40 wasn't thinking any of that and was just being cautious.

"Hmm…"

This time, Liana was looking somewhere other than contestant 40.

"Why?"

"No, that person over there."

Liana pointed out a certain location to Erich and whispered.

"Doesn't that person seem a bit creepy?"

Someone in a black robe was standing at the very back of the auditorium, quietly staring at contestant 40. Of course, there were quite a few audience members wearing hooded robes to hide their identities, just like contestant 40.

However, the excessively dark black robe gave off an unsettling feeling just by looking at it.

"…You're right."

Erich also shuddered a bit.

As they pondered, the voting began.

Contestant 40, who had dressed as a woman due to their desperate need for money.

He was already set to secure many votes, but when people found out he needed the money, he began to get sympathy votes as well.

Everyone knew that contestant 40 would undoubtedly win, and he did.

It was an almost unanimous victory, with no one objecting.

It was a hellish time.

"How do you feel about winning?"

"Ah, I'm… really grateful. Thank you."

Nevertheless, this was the pinnacle of hell.

Wearing the victor's crown and holding the trophy, he forced a smile, hoping that this torturous time would end quickly.

[Event Complete - Cross-dressing Contest]

[You have acquired 4,000 achievement points.]

[Your Magic Power has increased by 5.]

[Your Anti-magic Resistance has increased.]

In the end, after enduring a ridiculous time, he obtained the desired rewards.

And the prize money - twenty gold coins.

Twenty million won.

‘In reality, it's quite a large sum.

But I wondered if this money was worth trading for my dignity, which had already disappeared and might continue to do so.

My original magic power was 14.2.

Now, my magic power is 19.2.

If it increases by just 0.8 more, I'll gain a talent called "Magic Power Domination."

Yes.

It won't be long now.

I did all of this for that.’

The winner's crown and trophy, along with the victory speech, the applause and cheers of the audience.

“Oh senior! Take me!”

“Since you're prettier than me, just call me sister!”

The outbursts of middle school girls.

“Bro! Take me!”

“Bro, I…”

The outbursts of middle school boys.

“Let's be secret friends!”

High school students were no different.

I felt dizzy.

I wanted to throw up.

Yet, I tried my best to maintain a smiling expression. It seemed like none of the others, like Bertus, had caught on to me.

Then the host, who had tormented him with those annoying questions, looked at me with a sly smile.

"So, as a celebration of your victory, can you give an encore of the song you just sang?"

"…”

At the request to sing once more in celebration of my victory, I ended up belting out "Chilgapsan" again.

While I didn't know about the other things, it was pretty funny to see the bewildered

expressions of those who didn't know how to react to this situation.

Do you guys understand the sorrow of Chilgapsan's peak?

Anyway, the cross-dressing contest was over.

Now, I just have to safely dispose of the trophy and turn myself into Reinhardt.

“Brother! I… feel weird…”

Ah.

Should I just kill all of you and go to hell?

CHAPTER 303

I won.

I achieved what I wanted, and everything went as planned, but it felt like my soul was being robbed.

And I realized that focusing solely on the cross-dressing competition itself was a mistake.

Anyway, I had to leave the venue, but there were obviously no troops to escort me. I should've thought about the possibility of lunatics lurking around, trying to catch me as I leave.

But I only thought about winning, not planning a safe route in advance.

A considerable number of the departing audience members were waiting for a chance to approach me.

Seeing the crowd gathered outside the main hall, I couldn't help but sense their intentions.

"…”

It feels like I've become a celebrity.

But what sets me apart from a celebrity is that I'm the winner of a cross-dressing competition. Men and women alike are curious about my identity, swarming around like crazy.

Would you even know if I told you I'm Reinhardt? You wouldn't! Why are you curious about something you wouldn't know even if I told you!

If I go out like this, I'll be caught.

If those people come within my safety zone, I can't guarantee I won't throw a punch.

The other cross-dressing competition participants, seeing me stuck at the exit, left with awkward smiles.

Of course, there was no reason for people to gather around them.

What should I do?

The exit seems to be the only way out.

Should I go through a window?

"Uh… if you're not leaving…"

"?"

As I hesitated near the door, someone spoke to me, seemingly unable to pass by. When I turned around, it was Kono Lint. He had changed his clothes, no longer in a dress, but his makeup made him look quite funny.

Of course, I came here wearing these clothes, so I have nothing else to change into.

I could just let him pass and leave.

"Ah, sorry."

As I stepped aside, he tried to scurry past, looking nervous.

He's scared of me in a different way than when I'm Reinhardt.

Kono Lint, I didn't see what he was up to, but I know something happened.

He managed to teleport things other than himself.

In the original work, the ultimate form of Kono Lint's ability was to teleport himself, including clothes. I don't know what happened, but he gained the ability to move other objects.

I don't know if this is an improvement or not, but it's a fact that Kono Lint's abilities have developed exponentially compared to the original work.

Today, Kono Lint's ability improvement is even more incredible than my 5-point increase in magic power.

Kono Lint keeps glancing at me as he tries to leave through the exit.

Ability improvement.

Teleporting things other than himself.

"Wait, just a moment."

I instinctively grabbed Kono Lint's arm.

"Y-yes?"

Kono Lint's face turned red as I held on, his lips trembling.

A mix of confusion and uncertainty on his face.

That's not the point, you idiot!

There are people surrounding the outside.

"Could you please teleport me outside?"

Kono Lint is the only one who can rescue me right now.

Of course, he was startled.

Kono Lint went on and on explaining that his ability wasn't originally like that, there could be side effects, and I might even end up naked. Of course, that's possible.

Such a thing could happen.

No! It's fine!

I'll use my achievement points!

I've accumulated a whopping 14,000 points from the tournament and the crossdressing contest. Combined with my existing points, I have 18,000.

I can afford to spend this much!

"Even if there are side effects, I'll take the risk. So please do it."

"But, you might see me in a dangerous state…"

Even after I insisted, Kono Lint was still hesitant.

"It's okay. I won't blame you. I'll take responsibility."

He looked at me as if he couldn't understand why I thought being thrown naked far away was better than being caught by the people outside.

It's not like that!

You'll succeed!

Neither of us trusts you, but I trust my achievement points, okay?

After a long struggle, Kono Lint finally nodded hesitantly.

"Alright… I'll give it a try."

Today was the first time Kono Lint successfully teleported an object. Now, he has to succeed in teleporting a person.

Of course, there's a possibility that he will only teleport my clothes.

That's why I'll use my achievement points.

Kono Lint successfully teleported me outside the hall, to a secluded spot. My clothes came along as well.

[100 achievement points are required to trigger this event.]

100 points.

Surprisingly, it was cheaper than I thought. I expected it to cost around 500 points. Has this guy's ability already developed so much?

[You have used 100 achievement points.]

"Please, give me your hand…"

"Ah, sure."

I grabbed the trembling hand Kono Lint held out.

You little…

Don't be so shy, okay? I stared intently at Kono Lint's blushing face as he focused.

"Please don't blame me too much if it doesn't work well."

"It'll be fine."

"…"

He paused his concentration and looked at me.

"Do you trust me?"

No.

What do you want me to do?

Just send me already!

"Of course."

I had no choice but to say that while smiling, hiding my true feelings.

-Pop!

Then, in an instant, the scenery in front of me changed, and it felt like everything went dark.

"Gasp."

I couldn't help but gasp in surprise, as this was my first time experiencing this kind of teleportation.

In a blink of an eye, I was teleported from the hall's outskirts to an open space outside, away from the crowd.

Kono Lint wasn't with me, only I was teleported.

The effect of my achievement points was certain.

Luckily, I was still fully clothed. I just had to change my clothes and return to my original state now that I had safely escaped from people's sight…

At the same time I was thinking that.

-Thunk

"…?"

I saw something falling from thin air.

What is this?

I picked up the fallen item from the ground and examined it under the faint light nearby.

“…Oh no."

The moment I saw it, I realized I had used the withdrawal skill incorrectly.

The clothes that Kono Lint had been wearing just moments ago had fallen.

Kono Lint successfully teleports me to a remote area outside the auditorium, taking his own clothes along.

That kid.

Not only my clothes, but he sent his own clothes as well.

No wonder the price was so cheap.

Could it be that a new penalty has arisen for Kono Lint to send his own clothes along?

Are you still that incompetent?

Should I return this?

No, shouldn't he just come here instead?

Now that the situation has turned out like this, he should come looking for his clothes, right?

But this is a busy street.

It would be too difficult for Kono Lint to appear here wearing only underwear.

People think I'm just a girl wearing a dress.

Should I return this?

"…"

Then what's the point of having escaped?

I feel like I should just take it off.

But I really can't do that.

"Damn it…"

In the end, I had no choice but to trudge back towards the auditorium, still wearing the dress.

Fortunately, I didn't have to go near the people gathered in the auditorium.

A bit further away from them, there were familiar faces sitting on a bench.

Heinrich, Erich, Cayer, and Liana de Grantz were nearby, possibly waiting for Kono Lint to come out soon.

Approaching them is dangerous too.

But I hated being caught by those guys calling me 'brother' or 'older sister' more than death itself.

“Why isn't he coming out?”

“Is he changing clothes?”

Everyone was grumbling because Kono Lint didn't come out quickly, and I approached them. Luckily, the lighting wasn't too bright, so people couldn't easily see me.

"Um, excuse me…”

“…Huh?"

Everyone seemed surprised when the crossdressing contest winner suddenly appeared holding clothes.

"You're a prettier guy than me. What's up? Do you need something?"

Liana looked at me and asked with a smile.

You're really a wicked woman!

All the other guys were frozen, so Liana was the only one I could talk to.

"You're Royal Class… students, right?"

"Yes, but why?"

It wasn't a problem for me to recognize them since they were wearing Royal Class uniforms.

"This is, um, Kono Lint's clothes…”

"…?"

Everyone's expressions turned strange at my words.

"Well, I asked him to teleport me outside… but he sent his own clothes along too… so he might be in trouble… But going back is a bit…"

"Ah, I understand."

Liana raised her hand to stop me from speaking further and snatched Kono Lint's clothes from my hands.

You're really quick-witted when it comes to situations like this.

I had just been thinking of her as a wicked woman moments ago, but my evaluation of her changed instantly. Liana looked at me, grinning, and looked me up and down.

"If you're into this kind of thing, come to the Grantz estate."

"…Excuse me?"

"If you mention my name, Liana de Grantz, they'll let you in. You'll be able to try on all kinds of men's and women's clothes as you please."

She laughed while saying this, clearly making fun of me.

You're really wicked…

Anyway, after returning Kono Lint's clothes to these people, I fled the scene as if escaping.

I've had enough of this embarrassing situation.

Please, let's just return to normal now.

There's no end to humiliating situations.

Of course, it wouldn't be easy to get through this. There's no way this situation,

which aims to embarrass me, would let me off the hook easily.

As I tried to leave as quickly as possible, someone who recognized me chased after me.

"Um, I'm not a strange person."

"…"

"I was just wondering how desperate for money you must be to participate in such a contest despite your struggles. Hm."

A middle-aged man with a bald head grabbed me and began his speech. He seemed to have been one of the audience members and was talking about how he wasn't a strange person, how he had a respectable business, and how his children were soon to be admitted to the temple.

"So, if you're having a hard time, I can personally sponsor you."

What is this?

I don't know why it has come to this situation.

In reality, this man might actually want to help me because he thinks I'm in a difficult situation.

But, his gaze is strange, isn't it?

Do you know your eyes look really strange right now, sir?

I felt goosebumps all over my body.

"Of course, I'm saying this to avoid any misunderstandings, but I don't expect anything in return. Just, if there's anything difficult about your life in the temple, we could have various conversations. Um, that's what I mean."

You might say that, but your eyes are really weird, you know?

It's clear he's not a temple student or staff member. Should I just tell him not to babble like a broken record?

But, unfortunately, the festival means that there are people everywhere in the temple. Of course, security is tight.

If I get caught in a fight in an inappropriate place and get taken away by security, that would be even more humiliating. It would naturally reveal that I am Reinhardt.

This is the last test.

If I can't endure this and throw a punch, the rumor of Royal Class Reinhardt winning the cross-dressing contest and getting into a fight with a chatty middle-aged man before being dragged away by security would spread throughout the neighborhood.

That would be a real reason for suicide.

I have to endure it.

I couldn't bear it once and ran into Bertus.

If I can't stand it this time, it's really over.

"Ah, I understand what you're saying, but it's okay."

"Well, you should just accept an adult's offer of help. Let's find a quiet place to talk."

"I'm fine. I have enough prize money, and it's not that difficult."

"Don't think of it as something strange. I'm just trying to help you because you seem to be struggling. Do I look like a weird person?"

"It's not that I think you're weird, I'm just really okay."

"Well then, let's at least have a chat."

Ah, please get away from me, you annoying creep.

I'm getting irritated. I've told him clearly that I'm okay, but he doesn't seem to understand.

He definitely won't let me go.

"Let's find a quiet place to have a cup of tea and talk…”

Just as I was about to say something harsh, someone approached.

"Hey, what's going on here?"

"!"

A deep, resonant voice came from someone approaching.

I turned around and saw a human tank.

Although he wasn't in a dress anymore, it was the human tank, Richard Howlman.

He wasn't alone; he was with a group of people who looked like his classmates.

The middle-aged man froze in front of the even more intimidating human tank.

"What's happening?"

"Ah, I have something to discuss with this student…”

"This student doesn't seem to have anything to discuss with you."

Richard Howlman glanced at me as he said this.

Damn it.

It's a relief that you showed up, even though I feel weird.

Drive him away!

Whether or not he understood my desperate look, the 2-meter-tall human tank stared down at the middle-aged man.

"It seems like you have nothing to say? Huh?"

"But, I'm not a weird person!"

"Grabbing a weak-looking student in the middle of the night and making them

uncomfortable, that's what makes you weird. What else is weird? Get lost before I hand you over to the temple guards!"

Weak-looking student, huh?

You're the one who got beaten up by that weak-looking student in the tournament, you jerk.

And you were definitely about to say 'girl'…

"Uh, um… It seems there was a misunderstanding. Sorry."

Eventually, the middle-aged man retreated with his tail between his legs.

“Wow, that was cool, Richard.”

“That was awesome.”

"Ah, can you guys be quiet?!"

A bunch of annoying guys behind me were whistling.

I appreciate that he drove the man away, but it seems like I've attracted an even more annoying group.

"Um, are you alright?"

Richard looked down at me and coughed awkwardly.

I feel like I'm about to give up.

I'm going insane…

No, I'm already insane.

"Ah… Thank you."

Richard's classmates or seniors were whistling away, making my blood pressure rise. They must have come to see Richard's reaction.

I'm not sure why this guy participated in the cross-dressing competition, but anyway.

With a flushed face, Richard speaks without looking directly at me.

"It might lead to misunderstandings, so… It's best if you head back quickly."

"Yes, I should…"

“Hey, are you just letting her go?”

“Ask her to have a meal with us!”

"Ah, enough!"

Richard shouted at the people behind him.

This guy, at least he's acting gentlemanly. I thought he was just an arrogant jerk.

But come to think of it, I was the one who started the conflict during the tournament, not him.

I'm the real trash here. Richard looks at me with a troubled expression.

"Please, hurry back before it gets more awkward…"

"Ah… Yes. Thank you."

In the end, I was able to get rid of the annoying middle-aged man with the unexpected help of Richard Howlman.

CHAPTER 304

"No, my Supernatural Powers have gotten stronger, but now I have to teleport my clothes with me? Why does life always have to be so twisted?"

"I don't know. How am I supposed to know that?"

As Liana laughed, holding her stomach, Kono Lint's face grew sourer and sourer. Thankfully, the 40th participant who had teleported them returned their clothes, allowing Kono Lint to get dressed and return to the streets.

Kono Lint didn't care about winning; he just wanted the time to pass quickly. Now, all he wanted was to return to the dormitory, pull himself together, and rest.

It had been a terrible experience, but it was finally over.

Or was it just bad memories?

The person who, unbelievably, said they believed in him and smiled brightly.

That trust ultimately led to the successful use of his new ability, even though there was a penalty involved.

Who could it be?

He didn't particularly want to do anything, but it would be nice to know at least that much.

Maybe they could at least be friends.

The hand that briefly held the girl's, no, the boy's hand to teleport them was surprisingly soft.

His fingernails had been bitten ragged due to the tension in the waiting room, but the hand he had held was incredibly soft.

As more strange thoughts flooded Kono Lint's mind, he shook his head roughly,

trying to rid himself of those thoughts.

"What's wrong with him?"

Liana backed away a few steps, thinking Kono Lint was losing it.

"Hey, isn't that them?"

Cayer pointed, as if discovering something, and there was a silver-haired individual in a hoop dress who looked like a girl but wasn't.

Only their back was visible, but there was no doubt that it was the 40th participant in that outfit today. Erich nodded his head in agreement.

"That's right."

"Looks like something is going on."

Heinrich furrowed his brow, watching the scene.

The 40th participant, considerably shorter than the giant over 2 meters tall, stood facing him. A group of obviously bad-natured people surrounded them, snickering.

…

…

They were too far away to hear the conversation.

However, it was clear that the giant and his gang were either taunting or threatening the 40th participant.

Everyone realized that the giant had also participated in the cross-dressing competition. His huge frame in a dress had been quite shocking, making it memorable.

Liana smirked.

"Huh, so a bunch of men are bothering a poor, pretty boy?"

Although the wording was odd, making everyone grimace, it was true from a distance.

It was unclear what was going on, but the situation was definitely difficult.

"I guess I'll have to save him."

Just as Liana was about to step in to rescue the clearly troubled, pitiful, and pretty boy…

"Let's just go, shall we?"

"Uh… what?"

The person that had been surrounding the silver-haired boy parted, and he bowed his head to the large man before suddenly going on his way.

No one knew what had happened, but it seemed as if they were just letting him go peacefully. The fact that he even gave a nod of gratitude made it seem like they had done something good for him.

"What a letdown," Liana said, somewhat disappointed that nothing had happened. She watched as the large male student walked away, still keeping an eye on participant number 40.

"Anyway, he's really got a lot of sins, that guy," Liana said, laughing at the situation.

"But I'm really curious about what his major is and what class he's in…"

As Liana spoke, she closed her mouth. The person that seemed to be harassing participant number 40 actually just let him go as if it was a misunderstanding. But Liana waved her hand, looking at something slightly behind him.

"Hey, look at that."

"Where?"

"Over there. Isn't that the person we saw at the competition venue earlier?"

Liana pointed out someone wearing a black robe, quietly following behind

participant number 40.

"It does look like it…"

Erich had also been suspicious of the black-robed figure, so he understood what Liana was talking about.

Indeed, the mysterious black-robed figure was following right behind participant number 40. Everyone's expressions turned serious upon hearing Liana's words.

"Isn't that really dangerous?"

The unidentified assailant was following participant number 40. Liana, as well as the other Royal Class students, thought something would happen to him.

"Let's follow them."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

Cayer seemed a bit scared, worried about getting involved in something unnecessary.

"Is now the time to worry about that?"

Surprisingly, it wasn't Liana who said that, but Kono Lint.

Someone was tailing him.

And this time, he was sure it wasn't just some simple pervert like the middle-aged man from before.

At the competition venue, everyone had stared at him, but he distinctly remembered the black-robed figure who had been staring intensely from the back.

He had felt uncomfortable, but since there were many others like that, he didn't pay much attention. But now, that same person was following him.

What did he want from him?

He needed to get rid of the dress and remove his makeup, but this strange person was still following him.

He wasn’t closing the distance quickly, but he was definitely narrowing the gap. Although the stalker wouldn't be able to harm him on the main street, he just wanted to get home quickly!

He tried to blend into the crowd on the main street to shake off his pursuer, but the black-robed stalker continued to follow him from a certain distance.

He could have told the guards that a strange person was following him, but he didn't want to get involved in any more trouble.

Why do I have to deal with this? I thought to myself as I entered the alleyway.

I'll shake them off and head back outside the temple. Then I'll return to the dormitory as Reinhardt.

With that in mind, I turned the next corner of the alley.

"!"

"……”

The mysterious figure in a black robe that had been following me was now right in front of me.

This guy is dangerous.

Before I knew it, I was already throwing a punch.

-Whoosh!

But my fist cut through the air, and the robed figure easily dodged my straight punch with just a slight movement of their head.

Their movements were anything but ordinary. Even after my sudden attack, the figure did not retaliate.

“…I only intended to make contact since your business seemed to be finished. I had

no intention of attacking you, Reinhardt."

"!"

At those words, it felt like my brain froze.

He knew me.

Nobody else had noticed me.

"Who are you?"

Despite my hostile tone, my opponent remained calm.

"You should have known that the Order would contact you soon."

The Black Order.

They said they'd be in touch soon.

Of all times.

Of all times, it had to be today.

My head felt like it had been hit with a hammer.

No, no…

Why?

Why today?

Not Ellen, nor Bertus, not even Harriet, nor any of my dorm mates knew.

But oddly enough.

I had revealed the fact that I was crossdressing to a mage, who was neither an enemy nor an ally yet and with whom I had to discuss important matters.

"Wh-when did you… see it? Or, how did you know in the first place…?"

"I saw the list of participants. Participant number 40, Reinhardt."

Damn it, they saw that. How did they know I was in the crossdressing contest?

Even if they were from the Black Order and it wasn't a confidential document, could they just rummage through the list and find out about it?

The Black Order mage stared at me from within their black robe.

"So, the thing is… I had my own reasons for…"

I have a story behind this!

I can't explain it properly, but there's a story!

"I have no interest in your personal preferences."

However, instead of respecting my preference, the mage dismissed my words as if they had no interest in such matters.

It's not like that! I had thought of the stalker as someone who wanted to do something strange to me, but in reality, they had no interest in my appearance at all.

I was trying to justify my situation, but they didn't care about it at all.

Still, I thought my credibility would be somewhat diminished by the fact that I, a powerful individual who commands a Lord Vampire, was dressed like this.

"What's important to us isn't how well you pull off crossdressing, but how valuable the information you possess is to us."

Ignoring the fact that I'm dressed like this…

It's strangely hurtful…

Even Ellen isn't this indifferent.

Is the Black Order a group of ultimate indifferent people, or is it just this one…?

I couldn't tell if they had infiltrated the temple easily because of the festival or if it

was no big deal to infiltrate the temple in general.

Regardless of my embarrassment and sense of crisis, the Black Order member only said what they had to.

"You said you needed the Order's knowledge, and that you could provide us with information on Cantus Magna. Is that correct?"

“…That's right."

Talking like this was incredibly embarrassing, but since they didn't seem to care, I felt like the weird one.

"What knowledge do you need?"

The deal with the Black Order.

It started at this bizarre timing.

Are they really unrelated to the Gate incident? I don't know. But I have to find a way somehow.

There's no time for jokes or embarrassment.

"I need to know how to open a dimensional gate to another world."

"…”

The member didn't respond to my question. They didn't even ask why I was curious. They just silently stared at me.

"Do you know how?"

"I asked what knowledge you needed, not that I would answer. If you provide valuable information from your side, we will share knowledge of equal value."

"So you're admitting that you have knowledge worth sharing in exchange for that?"

I don't need to know the specific method.

The mere fact that the Black Order could tell me how to open the gate is already evidence for me. If I give them information on Cantus Magna, they'll tell me how to open a dimensional gate to another world. The moment they say that, the Black Order becomes a group capable of causing the Gate incident.

I'm not curious about the method.

I just need to know if you know it or not.

"I can't answer that."

But the Black Order wasn't so accommodating.

"Then the deal is too unfair. Even if I give you information on Cantus Magna, you might not be able to give me the information I want, right? Why should I make a deal like that?"

There's no reason to make a deal where one side suffers a loss. My goal is to confirm what each of us holds.

"Are you certain about the information on Cantus Magna?"

"Well?"

"Is the information not ready yet?"

The member's expression changed slightly. They seemed a bit angry.

"It's similar to not being able to tell me whether your knowledge is ready or not."

"…"

Could this be called a battle of nerves? Neither of us showed any hostility or aggression toward the other.

"We'll discuss this issue further and contact you again."

So this matter can't be decided by this person here either.

"…"

"By then, I hope you have the information on Cantus Magna ready."

"And if it's not ready?"

"I don't think you're the type to play games with us."

In the end, we only learned what each other wanted during this contact, and nothing was actually exchanged. However, the Black Order did not deny knowing about it either. It seemed like there was a glimmer of hope for resolving the Gate incident. My heart was racing like crazy.

Solving this wouldn't resolve all the problems, and there would be other issues to face. But it would be getting over the biggest hurdle. The Black Order didn't seem curious about my intentions; they just seemed willing to trade if both parties were prepared.

"At an appropriate time, I'll come back to you…"

Fzzt! Bang!

"…"

Just as our conversation was about to wrap up, a sudden flash of light flickered in the air and collided with the edge of the agent's right cheek. However, it was blocked instantly by a defensive spell that appeared.

What's going on?

"Pretty boy! Over here!"

Looking back, I saw Liana de Grantz, Kono Lint, and a group of royal-class individuals watching me. Why did they come all the way here? But looking at their desperate expressions, I had a feeling I knew what they were thinking.

Anyway, pretty boy? Why do you keep calling me that?

Liana shouted with a pale face.

"Hurry!"

Liana urgently called out to me. The agent seemed to understand the situation and subtly nodded at me.

Is that a signal to go?

He seemed calm but also quite perceptive.

"Y-yes!"

As I hurriedly fled towards Liana, she grabbed my hand and glared at the agent in the black robe.

"Hey, you! Are you a mage?"

"…"

"I don't know what your plan is, but what kind of mischief are you up to inside the temple? Get lost right now!"

Fzzt! Fzzt!

Sparks flickered near Liana's hair. It was as if she would send a lightning bolt at him if he tried any funny business.

No, don't…

Even if it's you, it's not right to pick a fight with a Black Order agent.

Thankfully,

"Hmm, this is unfortunate."

The Black Order agent suddenly pretended to be a kidnapper and began to back away.

"Then, let's meet again next time, pretty boy."

"…"

That…

Did he just make fun of me?

Whether it was an act or he was teasing me, the agent backed off and disappeared.

Liana, seeing the black robe vanish, looked at me with a worried expression and asked,

"Are you okay? You didn't get hurt, did you?"

"Ah, um… Y-yes… Nothing happened…"

No…

You didn't have to come…

"Phew, that's why I told you to go back inside! What were you doing? Even if you were trying to avoid them, what would you do if you came into an alley like this? Are you an idiot? Where do you live? I'll take you home."

"Ah… No, it's… it's okay."

With Liana's misunderstanding, the incredibly long day finally came to an end.

CHAPTER 305

In the end, it took quite some time to dissuade Liana, who insisted on taking me home. Fortunately, after the others had spent a while convincing her that it seemed alright, Liana finally let me go with a reluctant expression.

There was talk about whether I should report to the guards, but I had to dodge the issue, sweating bullets, saying it wasn't a big deal.

It was only after I had wiped off all my makeup and changed my clothes outside the temple that I returned to the dormitory.

I left the dress in the basement of Eleris.

It was an expensive dress, so I figured it was better to recycle it rather than throw it away.

Of course, I threw away the trophy.

There is an expression in martial arts.

Essence of the Origin.

In essence, it's a concept similar to the fundamental life energy of humans – a sort of emergency battery that, when used, could lead to death.

I felt so drained that it was as if I had used such a thing.

Having wandered around all day, they probably didn't see me at the dormitory. Of course, I wasn't the only one who had been roaming around.

Naturally, I returned quite late, and I could see the others who had been in entirely different appearances today.

"Hey, what were you doing all day?"

For example, Liana de Grantz, who had confidently said her sister would take her.

"I was wandering around because of the festival."

"Alone?"

"Sometimes you just want to be alone."

Unnecessarily, strength surged into my shoulders.

They might try to find a connection between the me they just saw and the me now. Honestly, I would think it was only natural not to recognize me when looking in the mirror.

In reality, they couldn't recognize me at all.

But facing them as Reinhardt now made my heart race with unease.

You?

Yeah.

Oh…

You were the one, weren't you?

I tried to act normal, but cold sweat ran down my spine, worried that they might say something like that.

Liana chuckled and draped her arm around my shoulder.

"Didn't you see the cross-dressing contest?"

“…Why would I go there?"

In truth…

I did…

Not only did I attend, but I was also a participant and even the winner…

It was even more surprising that they didn't recognize me at all…

"Oh, you missed a good show. You should've seen that person."

Liana laughed and went into her room.

I did run into the three, no, four useless brothers, but there was no reaction from them.

However…

"…?"

“…Why?"

"Huh? No, nothing."

Kono Lint did have a somewhat strange reaction.

But in the end, even he didn't seem to have noticed.

It was only natural.

I had returned as Reinhardt, not just with the makeup removed, but also with my original height, body shape, and facial structure restored.

It would be weirder if they recognized me!

That's how it must be, right…?

Southern outskirts of the Empire.

A considerable number of people had gathered on the grounds of an abandoned monastery that occupied a large area. It was impossible to identify the people by their attire alone, but in the center of the place where the bonfire burned, someone was seated on an old wooden chair.

The Man Seated in the Chair

The former Holy Temple Knight Commander, Riverrier Lanze, gazed at the female

student in temple robes standing before him.

Her name was Lydia Schmitt.

A finalist in the Unrestricted Tournament and a 6th-year student of the Temple Royal Class.

"It doesn't seem like a good idea."

“…I believe it's worth a try. Bolton agreed to take necessary action if the situation unfolds as predicted."

"Eleion Bolton?"

"Yes."

"Well, he'd have no reason not to welcome Olivia's return."

Lydia Schmitt's expression was resolute, as if she had made up her mind.

"But if things don't go as you expect, we'll proceed with the original plan, Lydia."

"Yes, Commander."

Despite the current Holy Knight Commander being Eleion Bolton, the female student addressed Riverrier Lanze as 'Commander.'

Everyone present unhesitatingly called the former commander, Riverrier Lanze, by that title. Lydia Schmitt, having completed her mission, turned to leave but then faced the commander again.

"Commander."

“…Is there something else you want to say?"

Unable to hide her regret, Lydia looked at a spot somewhere within the monastery.

"Does it have to be… that child? That child, too, is ultimately… a loyal believer under God's care…”

"Enough."

Riverrier Lanze cut her off, seemingly unwilling to hear more.

"I'm not unaware that Reinhardt is more suited for this role."

The mention of Reinhardt caused a flash of strange emotion in the female student's eyes. Twisted hatred and anger swirled within them.

"But Reinhardt is a Temple Royal Class student like you, and even a classmate of the Crown Prince and Princess. You know that he's not someone we can touch carelessly."

"…"

"Of course, if circumstances demand, we might have to involve him, but for now, this is the best course of action. Besides, we haven't decided to sacrifice that child for certain. Depending on the situation, no one may get hurt."

"…Yes, Commander."

Lydia Schmitt left the abandoned monastery after finishing her words.

The man beside Riverrier Lanze spoke cautiously.

"Do you think things will go as that child expects?"

"Not at all."

Riverrier Lanze shook his head with a stern expression.

"Her idea is bold, but… things won't go as she expects."

"Is that so?"

"I'm uneasy. I know she's talented, but…"

Riverrier Lanze clicked his tongue as he looked in the direction where the female student had disappeared.

"I can only hope she doesn't do anything foolish."

"I apologize. I thought she could be of help to us, so I brought her to the Nameless Monastery."

The man who had brought Lydia Schmitt to the Nameless Monastery bowed his head to Riverrier Lanze.

However, what had happened had happened.

Lydia Schmitt's usefulness wasn't limited to just this one occasion. She was soon to graduate from the Temple, and her enlistment in the Temple Holy Knights was planned.

"From now on, be more selective in choosing who to bring in."

"Yes, Commander."

Whether she liked it or not, Lydia Schmitt was a valuable asset to the group.

"How is Adriana?"

“…She's keeping a low profile."

"I see."

Riverrier Lanze nodded and instructed the man beside him.

"For now, just keep an eye on the situation. Monitor Lydia Schmitt's plan as it unfolds, and if things don't go as expected, send a letter to Olivia. If we mention we have Adriana, she'll understand."

With Adriana in their possession, luring Olivia out of the temple would be an easy task.

The real challenge would come after that.

Riverrier Lanze stared intently at the flickering flames.

Only Olivia Lanze could restore the honor of the fallen former commander of the

Holy Knights.

That would be their starting point.

From there, Riverrier Lanze intended to write the history of the sacred land that would last a thousand years.

Sitting on a hard wooden bed, Adriana gazed at the pale moonlight filtering through a small hole.

Her room contained nothing but the wooden bed, and two knights stood guard outside.

"…"

Adriana buried her face between her knees.

The nameless monastery.

Led here by Riverrier Lanze, Adriana lived under the watchful eye of the knights belonging to the monastery.

She had initially thought that Riverrier Lanze sought revenge against her.

However, her value didn't come from that.

'In a few days, Olivia will come here.'

'You just need to explain the situation to Olivia and persuade her to change her mind.'

That was all Riverrier Lanze had said.

What situation was he referring to, and what exactly did he expect her to persuade Olivia to do?

The talk was about convincing the faithless Olivia to regain her faith, but Adriana couldn't understand why she had to do that.

All she knew was one thing.

She was merely bait to lure Olivia.

Riverrier Lanze wanted to change Olivia's mind. Even if he failed to do so, he sought to regain his authority and honor by making her retract her statement as the royal daughter.

Adriana was nothing more than bait for that purpose.

She had refused.

Olivia had made her own choice, and she didn't understand why she had to forcibly reverse it.

Since then, Adriana had been imprisoned like this.

The nameless monastery.

She knew that they intended to create a new division among humanity after the Demon War had ended.

She had once been disappointed in those who had faith. She believed it was the fault of the believers, not the gods.

But still,

If the faithful were doing so much wrong, shouldn't the gods warn their followers?

Olivia would soon come to this place. Knowing she was held hostage, Olivia would have no choice but to come.

That was just the kind of person she was.

Although she was in despair from being held hostage, there was nothing Adriana could do.

In the Temple in the north, a festival was underway.

Meanwhile, in a ruin to the south, Adriana crouched, silently resenting the gods.

Thursday, breakfast time.

Kono Lint was having breakfast. Word had spread throughout Class A that Kono Lint had participated in a cross-dressing contest.

However, the only one who was taken aback by this news was Cliffman.

"Are you feeling okay today, Harriet? How's your condition?"

"Great, I'm fine."

Ellen showed no interest, and Adelia and Harriet were busy discussing something between themselves.

Kono Lint expected Reinhardt, who had also not attended the event, to at least make some comment, but all Reinhardt said was, "Uh… why did you go to such a thing?"

It was surprising.

Kono Lint had expected him to be shocked or disgusted, or to criticize him.

That's why Kono Lint couldn't help but be conscious of Reinhardt's reaction. Although Reinhardt wasn't the type to provoke first, he could be spiteful.

Kono Lint had a strange feeling when he encountered Reinhardt the night before.

It was difficult to describe in words, but it was something peculiar.

A subtle feeling that was hard to grasp, yet seemed familiar, but couldn't quite be understood.

Such a subtle sensation.

Although it was the festival period, the morning scene wasn't much different.

With the exception of Bertus, who seemed busy with his own matters, everyone was in their usual seats.

Such a typical breakfast time.

Kono Lint cautiously observed Reinhardt's reactions. Observing meant looking at him.

Looking at him meant watching Reinhardt closely.

And Kono Lint saw Reinhardt's hand, as he ate next to Ellen not far away.

That hand.

The nails.

Their shape.

They looked as if they had been bitten and torn apart.

"...!"

Upon seeing those nails, Kono Lint felt an electrifying sensation throughout his body, an intuition almost like a revelation.

The uneasy number 40.

The nail-biting number 40.

The number 40 who asked if he could teleport himself.

The number 40 who obediently offered his hand when asked.

The ruined nails.

The bitten and torn nails.

"Ah."

"?"

"?"

Kono Lint muttered involuntarily and met the questioning gazes of Erich and Cayer.

It couldn't be.

That person from yesterday, the silver-haired angelic figure.

It was difficult to describe, but that person.

That someone and.

Just because Reinhardt's bitten nails looked similar.

It was the silver-haired, golden-eyed number 40.

Reinhardt's eyes were blue.

However, that could be changed by wearing lenses.

"Ah."

“…What's up?"

"Why are you acting like that?"

Kono Lint knew his thoughts were utterly implausible.

"Aren't you participating in the Unrestricted-class tournament today?"

"Yeah."

“…Will you be okay?"

"Whatever, I'll manage somehow. But aren't you participating as well? You won the first-year tournament."

"No, I decided not to. Lucky for you."

"What?! You think you'd lose to me?"

"Heh, where on earth do you get the idea that you'd win?"

"You, just wait and see!"

Their voices are strikingly different.

Compared to the gentle and warm voice of the mysterious person from yesterday, Reinhardt's voice sounds needlessly harsh, doesn't it?

It's natural for people to have qualitative differences.

The gentle and kind number 40 and Reinhardt have a gap as wide as that between an angel and a demon.

Kono Lint tried to suppress the unpleasant imagination that welled up in his head.

But still.

Aren't there some similarities? If you put a silver wig on that face, golden eyes, a slightly shorter height, and a slender figure, then that's…

Isn't that right?

"Ah."

"Hey, what's wrong with you?"

"Are you feeling sick?"

In the end, Kono Lint let out three sighs in a row, attracting the attention of his friends who had been quietly eating their meals nearby.

CHAPTER 306

With Wednesday marking the end of my personal involvement in the festival, there was nothing left for me to participate in directly.

Since Liana was busy helping Cliffman and Ellen with their contest preparations, there was no room for me to intervene.

Today is Thursday, and the main event of the Unrestricted Tournament is taking place. Tomorrow, Friday, the Miss & Mister Temple Contest and the final round of the Unrestricted Tournament will be held.

Although I had secured my place in the Unrestricted Tournament main event by winning the Freshman Tournament, I decided not to participate.

It wouldn't be bad to gain some experience, but there were issues with my condition deteriorating more than expected when using magical enhancement, and I was hesitant to take the risk of injury.

I had barely scraped through the Freshman Tournament, which I had entered with a light-hearted attitude, and now, with the Black Order and the Vampire Council, I didn't know when I would have to engage in real combat. I couldn't push myself any further in the tournament.

So now, there's nothing left for me to participate in.

That ridiculous cross-dressing contest has also come to an end. Of course, the Black Order now thinks I have a bizarre taste.

Harriet was in Group C of the Unrestricted Tournament main event.

The participants had to arrive early at the stadium to prepare, so Harriet had no choice but to leave early.

Before she left, I had a brief conversation with her.

"I'm not sure what to say, but… will things go well?"

I felt sorry for saying this, but I couldn't figure out how Harriet had managed to get through the preliminaries and advance to the main event.

"Don't worry, I'll handle it."

Harriet responded, seemingly annoyed by my concern.

I had been asking her about various things since morning due to my anxiety, but she didn't seem particularly confident, nor did she appear anxious.

"What about the earrings?"

Surprisingly, Harriet wasn't even wearing the earrings imbued with calming magic.

At my question, Harriet sighed.

"Artifacts are prohibited, you know?"

Was that so?

Now that I think about it, that makes sense.

Of course, I'm already a regular artifact user with the ring of Sarkegaar, but I hadn't checked whether artifacts were allowed or not.

That meant Harriet would have to fight without any items to help her control her temper.

"Anyway, don't push yourself. If you feel like you can't do it, just give up. Be careful not to get hurt, because you never know. Keep in mind that most of the main event participants will be able to use Magic Body Strengthening…"

"Hey! My mom doesn't nag me this much!"

In the end, Harriet snapped at me. Then, she looked at me with a sad smile.

"Do I make you that anxious?"

Was it that obvious?

"Ah… no. It's not that…”

"No, I get it. It can't be helped. And to be honest, I don't feel too bad about you being like this."

Harriet sighed.

"I know you're worried about me. Thanks."

She could have taken my nagging as a sign that I didn't trust her and felt hurt, but Harriet seemed to choose to see it in a positive light.

"Still, I'm trying to change."

I want to become stronger.

That includes physical strength, but I thought it was more about one's mindset.

Ellen thought she was mentally prepared but not physically.

Harriet thought she wasn't ready in either aspect.

In the end, after numerous events and incidents, both Ellen and Harriet changed significantly. It wasn't a specific event, but rather the accumulation of many experiences that planted the desire to become stronger in both of them.

"I'll show you this time," Harriet declared confidently. Lately, she always looked serious and grave due to various matters, but it seemed like it had been a while since I saw her genuinely smile.

"Can I look forward to it?"

"No matter what you expect…”

Harriet grinned.

"It'll be even better."

Leaving me with those words, Harriet set off.

It was hard to believe, but I had a strong conviction that there was no falsehood in Harriet's words when she said she would show me something beyond my expectations.

Among the people I knew, there were two who had advanced to the Unrestricted-Class Tournament.

One was Harriet de Saint-Owan, who had just departed for the stadium.

The other was, of course, Olivia Lanze.

The reason why Ellen mentioned that she could win Miss Temple and even the Unrestricted Tournament was not to provoke but because both of them were actually participating.

After Harriet's departure, I was at the dormitory's main gate.

"Hmm, were you waiting for me?"

"Well, yes."

"I didn't expect that. Surprising."

Olivia came out of the dormitory, narrowed her eyes, and smiled when she saw me.

"By the way, senior, you can't use holy power, right?"

I knew that Olivia had confidence in her abilities. I couldn't tell to what extent, though.

However, Olivia's greatest asset was her holy power.

Of course, since she had renounced her faith, Olivia shouldn't use holy power regardless of whether she could or not. At my words, Olivia smiled.

"Right, I can't risk getting sent to a religious trial."

"Would you go that far?"

"Unauthorized use of holy power is obviously prohibited."

Could she be confident in winning the tournament without even using her holy power, which was her forte? Of course, just by advancing to the main round, her skills were already proven.

At my question, Olivia tilted her head and showed a subtle smile.

"Hmm? Are you worried about me?"

"Well, I'm sure you'll handle it well."

"Tsk."

Olivia stuck out her tongue as if she was disappointed.

Despite being unable to use her most important ability, she remained confident. I wondered just how skilled Olivia was.

And there was one more thing I was curious about.

"I have a question."

"What is it?"

"Last year, you didn't participate in Miss Temple, did you? Nor the tournament."

"Last year, I didn't have the time since I was busy with volunteer work, right?"

"And you also said that you weren't interested in it before that."

"Ah, yeah, that's true."

Olivia wasn't the type of person to show off. Before all this, she was always humble, considerate of others, and even willingly took a year off to provide support during the Demon World War.

In any case, Olivia Lanze wasn't the type to boast about her achievements. She never participated in the Miss Temple contest or any tournaments like that.

"Do you want to know why I suddenly decided to participate in all of these?"

"Yes, I'm curious."

Although she must have constantly heard suggestions from people around her to participate in Miss Temple or the tournaments, I wondered why she suddenly decided to join them all.

"Well… it's not really anything special…"

At my question, Olivia's face turned red as she scratched her cheek with her finger.

The reason why Olivia Lanze, who had no interest in showing off her beauty or her power, suddenly became interested in both of these things seemed quite embarrassing. With a shy expression, Olivia cautiously spoke up.

"It's… because of money…"

"Money?"

"Yes… Money."

Money? Olivia, who seemed to be even more indifferent to money than showing off, said she was participating because of money? She awkwardly laughed with a ha-ha-ha.

It was somewhat…

A foolish and innocent expression.

It felt like I was seeing the real Olivia Lanze for the first time in a long while.

It reminded me of when we first met. Even when faced with an unexpected request from an impolite freshman, Olivia willingly obliged and sincerely engaged in conversation.

"Actually, I was disowned, right? Although it wasn't really my fault."

"Ah… right."

"So… I'm broke now…”

Ah.

So that was it.

When she was the daughter of a Holy Knight commander, she must have lived without worrying about money.

However, now that Riverrier Lanze was dismissed from her position as a Holy Knight commander and Olivia was disowned, she might have managed to escape various problems in one way or another, but she still faced a bizarre issue.

In short, she had no source of income.

That's why she participated in Miss Temple and the tournament, both of which offered a considerable amount of prize money.

It all came down to money, after all.

Olivia's face turned red as she seemed embarrassed to say it.

Still, it was quite intriguing.

"Miss Temple provides a monthly allowance for maintaining one's dignity, right?"

Students of the Royal Class receive a monthly allowance under the pretext of maintaining their dignity.

Four gold coins per month.

It may not be a huge amount for some, but it's still significant.

Olivia didn't seem interested in luxuries at all. She didn't wear any jewelry or accessories, and she didn't seem to have any expensive hobbies.

Wouldn't the allowance from the temple be enough for her?

"Well… it is, but…”

Olivia bit her lip slightly.

"I know it sounds foolish and a bit like showing off, so I didn't want to say it, but…"

Olivia sighed deeply, looking at me with a sense of resignation.

"I've been personally sponsoring an orphanage since before. Even though I've given up my faith, it doesn't mean I've given up on those children. My father used to give me quite a lot of pocket money, so there was no problem, but after everything that's happened, I couldn't bring myself to reduce the sponsorship amount. Those places are struggling financially too…"

"…"

"So, now I've run out of money and I'm reaching my limits in various ways. That's why…"

I could understand why Olivia hesitated to talk about it.

She knew that she couldn't help but be seen as a fool for her actions.

It wasn't a place she had been supporting with the money she earned herself from the beginning.

But even in her current financially tight situation, she couldn't reduce or stop the sponsorship. That's why she needed the prize money from winning the tournaments and Miss Temple, which she wouldn't have been interested in otherwise.

In the end, it wasn't about picking a fight with Elen or anything like that, but it was all about money.

Olivia's lips trembled, as if she were making an excuse.

"Well, I'm not that desperate?"

"What do you mean by that desperate?"

"I'm not like those who use the money they receive for joining a team like Shanafel as sponsorship funds."

I had once asked Olivia why she couldn't live for herself.

Did she think I would be angry if she told me the real reason she needed money?

"Actually, I did consider it, but after talking to you last time, I thought that was going too far… I think that's not right. But this is fine, right?"

Regardless of how the prize money is used, it ultimately belongs to the person who won it.

The places Olivia sponsors are probably not financially well-off. I don't know how much her sponsorship amounts to, but if that amount decreases, they'll inevitably be affected.

Seeing me not saying anything, Olivia smiled weakly.

"I guess it is foolish after all…"

Olivia muttered with a deflated expression.

"I do think it's foolish."

"…"

Helping others while not being able to take care of yourself is foolish, isn't it?

I once thought so, and to some extent, I still do.

"But does that make it a bad thing?"

There's no reason for someone who doesn't live like that to look down on someone who does.

Just like how I live my way.

There are people like Olivia who live their way.

I don't know and can't judge the right or wrong of it.

At my words, Olivia looked at me with wide, surprised eyes.

It's not a bad thing.

I never said it was a good thing.

"Thank you, Reinhardt."

But Olivia smiled brightly, as if she had received some kind of encouragement. Every time I saw Olivia's genuine expression, not her usual pretentious one, I felt as if I were suffocating.

"Be my strength. A great deal of it."

Olivia grinned mischievously as she gently patted my head, then gave me a quick wink.

"Bro, I'll definitely win."

"I didn't exactly say you should win."

"Don't be so nitpicky! I got the general idea!"

Olivia quickly ran off and disappeared into the dormitory.

…She was always full of energy, no matter when I saw her.

By the way, Olivia didn't participate in the grade-based tournament.

If the prize money was her goal, she could have entered the grade-based tournament as well.

Did she think it wouldn't be fair because her opponent would be a fifth-grader? After all, she's technically attended one more year. She wouldn't be able to enter the sixth-grade tournament.

So, it seemed like she only participated in the unrestricted tournament.

As I watched Olivia disappear into the distance, I became even more conflicted.

Miss Temple and the unrestricted tournament.

Olivia was the overwhelming favorite to win both.

And Harriet and Ellen, who participated in those events, were relatively weaker.

Thus, putting personal feelings aside, I was mentally rooting for Ellen and Harriet. Their fights were so obviously one-sided.

However, Olivia was participating in both events not just for the sake of her interest, but also due to a serious issue of her own.

Now, I didn't know who to root for.

But the financial situation of the orphanage was the problem.

It was something I couldn't quite understand.

There's no way that could be true…

"Ah, excuse me."

After Olivia left, I was about to return to the dormitory when someone called out to me.

It was a student, and since I was in the lowest grade of the Royal Class, it was naturally an upperclassman.

"Yes?"

"Are you Reinhardt?"

"Yes, but…"

It was a kind-looking female upperclassman. She called me over, but she wasn't looking at me; she was gazing into the distance.

More precisely, she was staring in the direction where Olivia had disappeared.

"What did you talk about with Olivia?"

"Well, it wasn't anything special."

Who is this person, anyway?

"Is that so?"

The upperclassman in front of me started to stare at me intently.

I didn't feel any hostility from her gaze.

How should I put it?

I felt an odd sensation, as if chills were running down my spine. Her smile didn't seem genuine.

"So, who are you?"

"Oh, I didn't introduce myself."

The upperclassman held out her hand.

"I'm Schmidt. Lydia Schmidt. Sixth grade."

"Ah, I see."

I shook her extended hand.

Her appearance was kind, but as soon as I held her hand, I felt it.

She was no ordinary person.

For some reason, I felt uneasy and stared at the upperclassman.

"What business do you have with me?"

"Ah, no, Reinhardt. I don't have any business with you."

The mysterious upperclassman showed me a subtle smile.

"Not yet."

What's going on?

Leaving behind those strangely chilling words, the mysterious upperclassman slowly walked away from me.

CHAPTER 307

Although he had met with the peculiar senior, in the end, he couldn't find out anything about the person besides her name.

Lydia Schmitt.

He was the type to undervalue others. It was clear she was different from Bertus or Charlotte, but he couldn't precisely explain what set them apart.

Harriet was in the main tournament's Group C.

Olivia was also in Group C.

Since they were proceeding with the top 32 matches anyway, it seemed necessary to arrive early to watch Harriet's matches.

Harriet was the only first-year in the Royal Class, so there might be some who wouldn't bother watching the B Class matches, but surprisingly, everyone flocked to the stadium.

Even if they weren't particularly close to Harriet, they seemed curious that a first-year, especially a magic major, was participating in the Unrestricted Tournament. And, after all, she was their classmate, so they seemed to want to cheer for her.

It was fascinating that they shared a sense of camaraderie as classmates, even though there was no hierarchy between Classes A and B.

Except for Ellen and Cliffman, who would be participating in the contest tomorrow, and Bertus, who wasn't in the dormitory, all the first-years were heading to the stadium.

"Huuu…"

"…"

"Haah…"

"…"

"Ah…"

Fizzle!

"Hey! Why do you keep sighing so ominously?"

As I kept letting out deep sighs while walking, Liana, with her temples throbbing, screamed at me. Everyone looked at us because of that, but I didn't care.

"Aren't you worried? Our girl is about to face off against formidable seniors!"

This is it! Our girl has entered the tiger's den!

The waiting room wouldn't even have other first-years. What if some big shot in there picks a fight with Harriet, saying, 'Hey, cute junior girl, what are you doing here? This isn't a place for kids to show off,' could she handle it?

Seriously, what if there's someone like me, who starts a fight out of the blue!

"Is Harriet a child?"

"Isn't she?"

"…"

"…"

Ah.

We were classmates, after all.

Still.

Our blockhead…

I couldn't help but worry. No matter how much she assured me she would be fine…

"Haah…"

I let out another sigh. Liana frowned at me, sighing again and again for no good reason.

"Are you going to keep cursing her with bad luck?"

“…Cursing?"

At the mention of "cursing," the absentminded Dettomorian, who had been following us, looked over.

"Well, not exactly a curse, but maybe a simple spell to attract good energy…”

"Detto. If that works… wouldn't that be considered cheating…?"

"Is that so…”

"Yeah, let's not do that."

"Okay…”

Charlotte stopped Dettomorian from doing whatever he was planning.

Judging by Charlotte's expression, the problem wasn't cheating, but rather the possibility of side effects if Dettomorian did something.

"Don't worry, Reinhardt."

Seeing my continued anxiety, Ellen quietly spoke from beside me.

"Harriet will do well."

"On what basis?"

"Just a feeling."

Ellen wasn't smiling, nor did she wear a frown.

She just wore her usual expression, a bit plain and pudgy.

"I believe she'll do well."

Believes.

For some reason, that expression felt familiar.

The Duke of Saint Owan had said that his daughter possessed the greatest magical talent in human history, and that she could easily accomplish things that would astonish the world. That's what he had said.

And yet, here I was, sighing heavily at the thought of her participating in the tournament among the seniors.

Even though I should have had no doubt that she would do something amazing, something worth showing off.

I wonder if this is how the Duke of Saint Owan felt when he heard about the magic research club's project.

When someone is important to you, everything they do feels inadequate, and you end up dismissing things they should be able to do as impossible because of your worries.

Harriet feels inadequate.

But is it because I value her so much?

Is it because I want her to avoid getting hurt?

I'm not her parent.

Yet, thinking of her in such a way would ultimately be disrespectful to Harriet.

Still… our blockhead.

What if she suffers a crushing defeat in her first match?

How can I not worry?

It's not easy to change my mindset.

At this point, it's a sickness.

"It's okay, Reinhardt. She'll do well."

This time, it wasn't Ellen but Louis Ancton who spoke those words.

Naturally, the members of the magic research club were also present to watch Harriet's match, and senior Redina was no exception.

None of them seemed overly worried, which was strange.

"Hey, Reinhardt! Stop worrying about useless things and get ready to be surprised!"

Redina covered her mouth and giggled.

Did they have some kind of secret weapon?

It did seem like the members of the magic research club had put their heads together to prepare something for Harriet's tournament.

In the grade-based tournaments, the least interesting one would naturally be the first-year tournament, since their skill level would be the lowest.

In contrast, the sixth-year tournament would be the most interesting. But as students advanced through the years, there were plenty of instances where juniors were stronger than their seniors.

That's why the Unrestricted tournament exists.

From matching grade-based tournament winners against each other to the Unrestricted tournament, where students from any grade could compete, this became the highlight of the festival.

Though many winners of the sixth-year tournament advanced to the Unrestricted tournament and won, there were also many who didn't.

That's why it was undeniably the biggest event of the festival.

Soon.

It would be the stage to determine the strongest in the Temple.

Of course, this was limited to the participants.

-Wowwwwwwww!

The expectations and cheers of the crowd were incomparable to those of the first-year tournament.

People swarmed in, filling every seat.

"Ugh, it's so noisy."

Liana's voice came from behind me.

A considerable number of royal class seats were occupied.

There would be other royal class participants besides Olivia Lanze and Harriet. Although the cheering was so loud that others couldn't distinguish the voices, I could differentiate the murmuring of people by enhancing and focusing my hearing.

Who will win?

Maybe Lydia will?

No, I heard Olivia is participating too.

Ah… Really? But, I've never seen her fight. Isn't her major in divine power?

Her major is that, but… I heard she's incredibly good at close combat too.

Really? Who said that?

Hmm? I heard it from someone too… Who was it?

Most of the murmuring from the people around us was about Olivia. There were also fifth-year students who came to watch Olivia's match, including the student council president Ceres Van Owen and members of the religious club Grace. Due to the crowd, we only exchanged glances.

“…”

Since Saviolin Turner acknowledged that Olivia was the strongest in the next generation, her skill level could be guessed without seeing it.

Charlotte was sitting on my right.

On her right was Saviolin Turner, the supervisor teacher and Charlotte's bodyguard.

Olivia kept saying she was good at fighting.

And she also said she hated violence.

I know both are true. That's why most of the royal class audience talked about Olivia's skills.

But the important fact is, there are hardly any people who have actually seen Olivia in action.

There are plenty of rumors about how amazing she is, but because she doesn't have a showy personality, it seemed no one had actually seen her in action.

There were many people who said she was great and amazing, but no one said they had seen it themselves.

"Is this person Olivia really that amazing, Lady Turner?"

Sitting next to me, Charlotte whispered to Saviolin Turner.

Charlotte seemed to be bothered by the murmurs she heard from the surroundings.

"You should call me teacher now, Your Highness."

Why is this person so sensitive about his title?

“…If that's the case, shouldn't you treat me as a fellow student of the temple in the first place?"

“…I can't do that. How could I commit such a disrespect?"

"Mother, so are you treating everyone who calls me Charlotte and treats me as an equal as disrespectful?"

"That's not it. The Temple has its own rules, so I should follow…"

'No, if I say it like this, since I'm the supervisor teacher, I should call you Charlotte according to the rules, right?'

'Self-contradictory, huh?'

'I made a mistake in my words.'

'What should I do?'

Why do I feel like I can read her thoughts without even looking at her face? Is it an illusion?

'Let's just… change the subject.'

"Um. Olivia Lanze is an excellent student. She's especially outstanding among the highly talented royal class of the temple who are expected to have a promising future."

"Ahh. To what extent?"

"Hmm."

Saviolin Turner crossed his arms and watched the arena, which had yet to begin the competition.

"If there are students even slightly below Olivia's level, I would be quite surprised."

"Hmm, Turner… I mean, Lady, how do you know about Olivia Lanze?"

"Mostly from my junior, Ephinhauser. As far as I know, Olivia Lanze hasn't taken any close combat courses since her third year."

I understood why most students talked about Olivia's incredible skills but had never actually seen them. There was no reason for her to demonstrate her abilities in class.

"Why not?"

"She said she didn't want to learn any more techniques to hurt people."

“…Interesting."

"Ephinhauser told me that Olivia was already at a level where she didn't need to learn more at that time."

“…Ah."

Charlotte seemed flabbergasted.

"So the moment she said she didn't want to learn more, she had already learned enough to have nothing more to learn?"

“…In a way, yes."

I don't want to learn any more techniques to hurt people! (Nothing left to learn)

She's quite a character.

Anyway, after that, Olivia hadn't taken any practical courses or participated in competitions.

"Of course, I haven't seen her abilities firsthand either."

Even Saviolin Turner had only heard everything from Ephinhauser.

"So, it's just rumors?"

At that, Saviolin Turner shook his head.

"Hmm, there's no possibility that it's just a baseless rumor."

"Why not?"

"Yes. Are you not aware that Olivia Lanze went to the rear support line during the Demon World War?"

"I heard she did. For treating wounded soldiers and medical support…"

"Your Highness."

Saviolin Turner looked at Charlotte.

She hadn't participated in the Demon World War. Rather, she couldn't.

But she must have known the details of the war.

"During that time, when every hand was precious, do you think a powerful divine force like Olivia Lanze would have only done that?"

"…No way, was she deployed to the front line?"

"Of course, according to her wishes, she was not deployed to the front line. However, all sorts of things happen in the rear support area. For instance, sudden raids by the Demon King's army."

It was the same for me and everyone at the temple.

We had been too naive.

It was a war, but everyone thought that Olivia, who had gone to the rear support, had simply treated people and looked after the wounded.

Just like her nickname, the Holy Maiden of Eredian.

Everyone assumed that she had returned after performing sacred tasks like an angel of healing.

"I won't go into the details, as it's not a pleasant thing to hear."

Saviolin Turner spoke while gazing at the arena, where the first match was just about to begin.

"Olivia Lanze faced numerous dangerous situations in unsafe places and returned alive."

"…"

Olivia was not a delicate flower nurtured in a greenhouse.

She had experienced a real war and survived it.

Perhaps that was why she came to hate violence even more.

It must not have been a pleasant memory for Olivia. That's why she said she had gone to provide service and nothing more.

"In that region, Olivia Lanze was not called a saint but a god of death."

On the battlefield where Olivia went to save people, she killed countless soldiers of the Demon King's army.

That's why, even her allies feared her and called her the god of death.

I had thought Olivia wouldn't particularly like the nickname Holy Maiden of Eredian.

In fact, she had another nickname she would undoubtedly dislike even more.

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The Unrestricted-Class Tournament was on a different level compared to the first-year tournament I had experienced.

Not only were a significant number of participants from the Royal Class or former Orbis Class seniors, but even those from general classes possessed skills that couldn't be disregarded.

First of all, all close combat participants who made it to the finals had awakened their Magic Body Strengthening.

Although there were numerous people who couldn't awaken their Magic Body Strengthening until they graduated, it meant there were still those who had succeeded.

It was a competition to determine the strongest person in the temple, so having Magic Body Strengthening was a basic requirement.

There may also be a case of organizing the match-ups to prevent those with skills close to the winning candidates from being eliminated in the preliminaries.

As I watched Group A's match, I caught sight of the mysterious female senior who had spoken to me earlier in front of the dormitory.

"Royal Class 6th year, Lydia Schmitt!"

She was also participating in the tournament.

It seemed she was one of the winning candidates mentioned before Olivia's name came up.

Was she conscious of her competition? With Olivia not participating, her victory would be nearly guaranteed, but Olivia's sudden participation made winning more challenging. Was it resentment?

Olivia should have been a 6th-year student, having taken a year off.

That meant Olivia and Lydia Schmitt had spent a long time together in the temple.

But Olivia's bizarre behavior only began recently. I couldn't imagine her having a bad relationship with anyone.

Royal Class 6th year, B-2 Lydia Schmitt.

Regardless of what she was thinking, what was important was her tremendous skill.

I had felt it when we shook hands, but seeing it with my own eyes was even more extraordinary.

“…Incredible."

"Indeed."

After watching Lydia Schmitt's main match, Ellen and I couldn't help but say that.

A paladin. She was a monster who could simultaneously use divine power and Magic Body Strengthening.

The competitors in the matches following her clean victory also had amazing skills, whether they won or lost.

Even though I won the first-year championship, it was clear that I couldn't hold a candle to them. It wasn't that I was overly proud of my victory, but seeing the seniors' skills made me realize how much further I had to go.

I wasn't sure about Ellen, but I still had a long way to go.

The audience was also excited, watching the students exchange fierce blows with their Magic Body Strengthening active.

Charlotte seemed uninterested in this sort of thing, but she was concentrating as she listened to Saviolin Turner's commentary beside her.

Listening to it from a distance was quite helpful.

She would predict who would win or say things like, "seeing their actions in this situation, it seems the outcome is already clear." Almost all of Saviolin Turner's

words turned out to be correct.

Of course, there were also those who had no interest at all.

"Adelia, wake me up when Harriet's turn comes."

"Huh? Oh… Yeah."

Liana lay her head on Adelia's thigh, who was sitting beside her.

The order was me, Ellen, Liana, and Adelia. So, Liana lay her head on Adelia's lap while draping her legs over Ellen's.

Ellen seemed indifferent, but I couldn't stay calm.

"Do you want to cause a scene while wearing a skirt?"

"I'm wearing shorts underneath, so it doesn't matter."

Liana, still lying down, tried to reach for the hem of her skirt as if it didn't matter.

What on earth was she trying to do?

-Slap!

"Ouch!"

"…"

When Liana attempted to do so, the previously quiet Ellen slapped Liana's thigh with a smacking sound.

"Stay still."

"Uh, okay…"

Ellen stared at Liana, and Liana nodded her head with a flustered expression while lying down.

Ellen seemed to be worried Liana might cause trouble, so she firmly held Liana's

skirt.

-Boom! Crash!

In the meantime, two magically empowered students were fiercely fighting each other.

It wasn't difficult to follow with my eyes, but the fight between these monsters seemed uncertain even if I were to stand there myself.

Now, Harriet has to face these opponents.

How are you going to handle them when even I feel uncertain?

Our dear, dense friend…

You can do this, right?

I feel so anxious that I'm losing my mind!

It's not because you lose that you'll be mentally exhausted, right?

-Tap tap tap tap

"Stop shaking your leg."

Ellen eventually had to say something to me.

I couldn't help but feel anxious.

-Sigh…

Somewhere, a sigh that was remarkably similar to mine could be heard.

I suddenly focused on the sound of the sigh, not for any particular reason.

It felt incredibly similar to my own and somewhat…

Familiar.

Honey, please stop.

Aren't you worried too?

Our child will manage just fine.

The Duke and Duchess of Saint-Owan sat side by side.

Considering it was the festival season, it wasn't unusual for the Duke and Duchess of Saint-Owan to visit the temple. Moreover, since Harriet was participating in the Unrestricted-Class Tournament, it was only natural for them to come and watch.

Our seats weren't very close, so it didn't seem like the Duke of Saint-Owan recognized me.

However, it looked like the Duke and I shared the same thoughts.

Given my state, it was only natural that people around me would find my behavior mentally exhausting.

But… should I go and greet them?

The last misunderstanding seemed to have been resolved.

It would be strange not to greet my friend's parents when I have clearly seen them, right?

But going out of my way to greet them also feels odd.

What should I do?

I'll think about it after this is over.

In any case, having a comrade who shares the same anxiety makes me feel somewhat better.

Unrestricted-Class Tournament Main Round, Group C, Third Match.

That was Harriet's first match.

-The only participant among the first years, and the only magic major in this tournament! Royal Class 1st year, student A-4, Harriet de Saint-Owan!

Harriet, not in her school uniform but a long-sleeved outfit that seemed easier to move in, stood still.

A first-year student, and a magic major.

Even those who didn't know her well already understood she was at a disadvantage.

Naturally, not only the Royal Class first years, but also Liana, who had been lying down, now sat up straight and watched the arena.

Her opponent was Elnore Class 4th year Aisa Shelkin.

Though not knowing who she was, like all Unrestricted-class tournament main round contestants, she could use Magic Body Strengthening.

She was introduced as a regular class student, but there was a good chance she had transferred from Orbis Class.

Her weapon was a sword.

As a magic major, Harriet had no weapon.

The Unrestricted-class tournament starts with a best-of-five from the round of 36.

Tension was visible on Harriet's face. It would be her first time fighting someone in front of so many people.

Would she fail to cast her spells?

With the announcer's brief introduction, the first set began.

What would Harriet show us? I enhanced my sight and hearing to better understand the situation.

Aisa Shelkin stared at Harriet silently.

“I don't know how a magic major, especially a first-year, made it to the main round…”

The 4th-year student spoke quietly, her sword aimed at Harriet.

“Your luck ends now, junior.”

Harriet offered no response.

The key to overpowering a magic major was a swift and decisive victory.

Not giving them a chance to attack. Aisa Shelkin's body emitted a faint blue glow.

Magic Body Strengthening.

-Thud!

At the same time, she made a split-second charge. Like the wind, Aisa Shelkin's figure closed in on Harriet.

In response to the charge, Harriet reached out her hand.

-Crash!

Aisa Shelkin's thrust was blocked by a blue barrier that spread from Harriet's hand.

It was presumed to be a protection-type spell. Perhaps she had pre-cast it.

But protective spells couldn't last forever.

Aisa Shelkin seemed to know this as she repeatedly hammered away at Harriet's barrier.

-Bang! Crash! Clang!

Heavy blows carrying the power of Magic Body Strengthening. Defense alone wouldn't be enough.

The blue light of the protection spell was already fading, seemingly reaching its limit.

All of us watched the scene in silence. Even Saviolin Turner appeared to be

withholding judgment as he observed the situation.

-Crash!

The protection spell disappeared with Aisa Shelkin's strike, and seizing the opportunity, she lunged with her sword again.

Was the next protection spell not ready yet?

At that moment, when it seemed she would allow an attack.

-Whoosh!

Harriet's figure vanished.

"!"

In an instant, Aisa Shelkin lost sight of her target and swung her sword at empty air.

She couldn't see it, but the audience could.

On the opposite side of the arena, there stood Harriet de Saint-Owan.

Short-range spatial teleportation magic, Blink.

"Battlemages must master this magic first,"

No sooner had Saviolin Turner finished his brief comment than Aisa Shelkin's gaze shifted towards Harriet, who had put some distance between them.

However.

-Zap!

A blue flash from Harriet's right hand struck Aisa Shelkin's body.

-Argh!

Thanks to her Magic Body Strengthening defense or her sufficient anti-magic training, Aisa Shelkin winced but didn't fall.

Yet, she couldn't easily escape the shock from the lightning.

In that brief moment.

-Roar!

A crimson fireball blazed above Harriet's right shoulder. A Fireball was fired at Aisa Shelkin as soon as it was cast.

-Boom!

Even before the Fireball's explosion subsided, I witnessed an unbelievable sight.

As soon as the fireball hit, another fireball was already forming on Harriet's left side and was fired.

-Bang!

Another fireball was shot at Aisa Shelkin, who was once again engulfed in an explosion and roaring sound.

Strange.

Saviolin Turner was also narrowing his eyes at the spectacle.

"Her casting speed… It's very fast."

People were feeling Harriet's exceptionally fast magic casting speed.

As if not to give her opponent any chance to escape, Harriet hit Aisa Shelkin with three consecutive Fireballs.

Was it already her limit?

Upon the impact of the third fireball, Aisa Shelkin was recalled with the light of a Recall Artifact.

“The first set! Freshman Harriet de Saint-Owan wins!”

What in the world had just happened?

What on earth did she do, and how did she do it?

Harriet found me among the numerous spectators, looking straight at me.

As if she assumed I could hear her naturally. She said,

“How's that?”

I didn't know what she had done or how she had done it.

But I could tell that this abnormal talent was starting to cause some abnormal events.

“Woah!”

The audience, intoxicated by the destructive power and brilliance of the magic, roared with cheers.

I didn't know what she had done, but if she could do that much, it was clear that I was no match for Harriet now.

I smiled at Harriet.

A mouse had been worrying about the cat.

But it wasn't such a bad feeling.

“Didn't I tell you? She'd do well on her own.”

“Well, I knew this would happen, of course.”

“…”

During that time, the Grand Duke Saint-Owan had already changed his stance.

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The result was a 3-0, a complete victory for Harriet.

Her opponent, Aisa Shelkin, wore a bewildered expression.

She had been utterly defeated by a magic major.

It couldn't have been any other way.

The weakness of magic was casting. But in the face of Harriet's abnormally fast casting speed, Aisa Shelkin could only always be a beat too slow.

Of course, Harriet didn't possess the no-casting ability, but her extremely fast casting speed allowed her to toy with the close combat major as if it were a mere game.

Redina's no-casting talent was thus inconceivable.

With a sufficient amount of mana like Harriet, a faster casting speed alone could overwhelm battle majors without any strategy. If casting were eliminated altogether, there would be no time to catch a breath before being pummeled.

The spectators were merely cheering, but those who had been watching could only be perplexed.

Harriet's capabilities were already quite strange.

The same went for Saviolin Turner, who had been observing every fight and making various comments.

"Magic requires casting."

"Right. It's common sense."

At Charlotte's reply, Saviolin Turner shook her head. She too seemed to find the situation somewhat peculiar.

"However, high-level battle mages can use magic almost instantaneously, without the computational process of casting."

"Yes, that must be true as well."

"It seems Harriet de Saint-Owan is demonstrating a casting speed at the level of a skilled battle mage."

Saviolin Turner's expression revealed thoughts of near certainty that 'such a thing couldn't possibly be possible.'

From Saviolin Turner's perspective, a skilled battle mage wasn't just someone of a casual level, but rather one who had been thoroughly honed in real combat situations.

A casting speed at the level of a battle mage with at least 10 years of experience.

Could that really be possible?

"Among the countless magicians, only battle mages focus on multi-casting or chain casting. There's no real reason for other types of magicians to have fast casting speeds. Instead, they pursue precision… But what reason could there be to devote time to that technique…?"

Fast casting speed was impressive, but ultimately, it was limited to battle mages. Magicians who made combat their profession were looked down upon by other magicians, as they had previously heard.

Fast casting was a skill only necessary for magicians who fought for a living.

It seemed difficult for Saviolin Turner to understand why the young lady of the Saint-Owan duchy would be proficient in a skill typically reserved for battle mages.

Harriet desired to possess actual power. That's why she devoted her time to learning a skill that had little connection to her noble birth.

Of course, neither Saviolin Turner nor I could fully understand how such a thing became possible just by devoting time to it.

What on earth had happened at the Magic Research Society?

Adelia showed a troubled smile upon meeting my gaze.

"Harriet de Saint-Owan seems quite promising."

In the end, it appeared that Harriet had acquired considerable combat skills, contrary to my expectations.

Ellen had said that Harriet would do well.

I wasn't sure if she knew it would turn out this way, but Ellen didn't seem particularly surprised.

While the round 32 matches were underway, I eventually realized that Harriet had developed formidable skills contrary to my concerns. Harriet had undeniably acquired the ability to secure victory in the preliminary round of the Unrestricted Tournament and secure a spot in the main competition.

As the round of 32 matches for Group C unfolded, the moment everyone had been waiting for finally arrived.

Royal Class 5th year, Olivia Lanze.

From the beginning, Olivia was well-known, and there were people who recognized her and cheered. The reaction from the Royal Class was also intense.

The announcer gave a detailed introduction to Olivia. Although there were some embarrassing comments, Olivia stood still with a faint smile on her face.

However, there was a problem.

She had abandoned her faith.

But she could still use her divine power, and at an extraordinarily potent level.

However, if she were to use her divine power in this tournament after giving up her faith, it would pose a problem.

To avoid any backlash, she would have to fight without using her divine power.

Her opponent was a male student in his 5th year.

Although he was introduced as an ordinary class member, he seemed to be from the Orbis Class. Olivia seemed to know her opponent, and since the Royal Class and Orbis Class had quite a few connections, it wasn't too strange for them to know each other.

Olivia did not look in my direction.

Everyone was curious about the extent of Olivia's skills, and it was the first time Saviolin Turner would see her abilities in person.

“Now, we will begin the final match of Group C!”

With the declaration of the start.

I was curious to see how Olivia Lanze would perform without using her divine power.

Her opponent was armed with a spear.

Olivia had no weapons.

Her opponent's body was enveloped in blue mana.

Olivia looked at her opponent with a smiling expression.

“I'm sorry to the audience.”

Olivia's words reached my ears.

“My match might be a bit, dull.”

“Ooooh”

Olivia's body was wrapped in mana that seemed to burn blue.

I had guessed that Olivia could use Magic Body Strengthening. Without using even a hint of divine power, the unarmed Olivia moved.

No, I could only tell that she moved; I couldn't even follow her movements with my eyes.

-Zzuzz!

-Kuh… ack!

The next moment, Olivia had already landed a punch in her opponent's abdomen.

The enormous force behind that blow sent her opponent flying through the air, far beyond the boundaries of the arena.

Even with the Magic Body Strengthening, the destructive power of her bare fists was unbelievable.

“Ah, did I overdo it?”

The first set ended in the blink of an eye.

A powerful championship contender.

No, at that level, she might be the sole contender for victory.

Ellen and I stared blankly at Olivia, who had sent her opponent, enhanced with the same magic power as herself, flying.

She had to fight without divine power.

Was that the penalty from the start?

Even in that state, it seemed there was no one who could stand against Olivia.

The nickname given to such a person was the Holy Maiden of Eredian.

Shouldn't she have been called the strongest in the Temple instead?

After all the round 32 matches had concluded.

A brief break was given, and the round 16 matches were about to begin.

Just like in the first-year tournament, the winners of each group would face the semi-finals and finals the next day.

So, if Harriet wins this round 16 match and the next round 8, she can challenge for the finals.

However, Harriet's goal is not the finals.

In the waiting room for the contestants.

Harriet sat quietly on the sofa. She wanted to go into a room and sort out her thoughts alone, but she thought it would be better to analyze her potential opponents beforehand.

"Harriet, right? You're amazing. We'll be meeting in the next match, so I look forward to it."

"Ah… Yes."

There were some nervous people, but the female senior who would be facing her in the next match seemed cheerful. A royal class graduate, she was known as a Supernatural type rather than a close combat type.

Her ability was wind.

She easily overpowered her opponents by blowing them away with air pressure and causing them to lose by leaving the ring.

Harriet was thinking about how to deal with this.

"Do you want some of this? It's delicious."

"Ah, no… I'm fine."

The girl sat next to her and mumbled about various things.

"But what should I do if my wind is blocked by your protection? I actually don't know how to fight that well."

It seemed like she had already accepted her defeat. She relied on creating a ring-out with her wind, but her opponent, Harriet, knew how to use protection.

The female senior, who was in her fourth year but somehow felt slightly cute, seemed to have a poor match-up.

She might reveal hidden abilities after pretending to be so vulnerable, but Harriet thought that it was unlikely for fellow royal class members to do so.

At a glance, it seemed she didn't care much about winning. Although Harriet found the constant chatter annoying, she didn't really dislike it.

"You don't seem… very nervous."

"Nervous? Hmm, there's no reason to be."

She chuckled as she nibbled on a macaron and took a sip of her tea.

"Anyway, Olivia is going to win Group C."

It seemed she had given up on winning since Olivia was participating. Seeing her reaction, Harriet thought that it could be possible.

What had happened was not clearly seen.

Most of the participants were able to use Magic Body Strengthening, but Olivia was exceptional among them.

Her main power, divine power, wasn't even used, and she was already that strong. Everyone seemed to have given up halfway after witnessing Olivia's overwhelming presence.

What would I have done if I were in their shoes?

Harriet thought, but no clear answer came to mind.

Olivia Lanze.

She entered the Unrestricted Class Tournament to challenge Olivia Lanze. Harriet had just witnessed Olivia's skills and didn't think she could win.

However, Harriet wanted to at least stand before her.

She could face Olivia if she made it to the last match of Group C, the quarterfinals. She didn't think she could win, but she wanted to at least face her in a match.

She didn't know why.

Olivia Lanze was surely stronger than Ellen.

Harriet had never harbored feelings of rivalry.

But at some point, those feelings emerged.

The desire to become stronger naturally transformed into the desire to not lose.

Harriet chatted with the other participants while watching Olivia Lanze approach from a distance. She seemed at ease, smiling and conversing with the other competitors, who were now her rivals, as if they were old acquaintances due to her long stay at the temple.

Ellen had said she didn't like Olivia.

Harriet didn't like her either.

As Olivia approached, their eyes met.

"Hello?"

“…Hello."

"Ah, you're one of Reinhardt's friends too? Nice to meet you."

Olivia smiled warmly.

The phrase 'one of.'

Assuming someone else came before her in that statement.

Harriet found it infuriating.

Harriet had often seen Olivia picking fights with Ellen for no reason. She knew where the urge to instigate those conflicts came from.

Olivia disliked Ellen.

Ellen disliked Olivia, too.

"You're really impressive. Already so strong in your first year. Aren't you facing my sister in the Group C finals today?"

However, Olivia didn't seem to dislike Harriet.

Her kind expression and tone, an attitude that showed not the slightest bit of hostility.

Her unabashed praise.

"Do you feel okay? Should I cast a healing spell on you?"

Unnecessary consideration.

Harriet knew that her opponent wasn't on guard against her at all.

It was as if she didn't need to reveal any hostility to someone of Harriet's level.

Not even being ignored, but feeling even more disregarded.

"Let's both do our best."

I don't like you.

But you don't dislike me.

Harriet disliked the situation because of the gap in their feelings toward each other.

"I don't like you, either."

“…Huh?"

And so, Harriet abruptly threw cold water on the warm and friendly atmosphere. Olivia stared at Harriet for a moment, then scratched her cheek.

"Oh… Really?"

As if reading something from Harriet's expression, Olivia offered a subtle smile.

It was the same expression Olivia sometimes wore when looking at Ellen. A subtle sneer mixed into that smile.

"So what?"

Harriet stared silently at Olivia.

Ellen was annoyed and angry about receiving groundless hatred.

However, she wouldn't know the sorrow of not being able to receive even that kind of hatred.

She wouldn't know how sad it was to be regarded as unworthy of being disliked and to have someone show her goodwill.

So.

I'll make you dislike me.

I'll make it so you can't ignore me.

"Just, I don't like you."

"Really? That's too bad."

In response to Harriet's words, Olivia showed a bright smile.

"I'm not really interested in you."

"…"

The words, 'in you.' Implied that while she might not know about others, she had no great interest in someone like Harriet.

As expected, that person was deliberately ignoring her.

She might not be able to win.

But she would make it so that she could no longer be ignored.

Harriet clenched her teeth as she watched Olivia's retreating figure.

Harriet achieved a remarkable growth.

She easily succeeded in advancing to the finals of Group C and the top eight.

Her round 16 opponent was a 4th-year Royal Class wind-element Supernatural, who she effortlessly defeated. After blocking the wind and aiming five Firebolts in return, the opponent conceded. It seemed as if there was no need to continue.

It was the female upperclassman who had told her to seek her out if anything happened during the Meiatun incident. Although Harriet had never approached her, she remembered her face.

In the end, it seemed like it was just a mismatched opponent. Against the close-combat type she could simply lightly blow away opponents with the wind, but against a magic major, she had met her match.

And so, the Group C finals.

As expected, Olivia effortlessly defeated her round of 16 opponent and advanced to the Group C finals.

Harriet de Saint Owan.

Olivia Lanze.

The winner between the two would advance to the top four and have the chance to compete for the championship tomorrow.

Though she managed to finish two matches properly, the Duke de Saint Owan still ended up sick with worry.

-Tap tap tap tap

“…Stop trembling already."

Ellen's scolding.

“Sigh……”

“Honey, why are you like this again?”

“Her opponent is just too formidable…”

The Duke received scolding from his wife as well.

No matter how much Harriet had grown remarkably, Olivia Lanze was by no means an opponent for Harriet at the moment.

The only hope was that Olivia Lanze wouldn't use her divine power.

That meager advantage was the only possibility for Harriet to secure victory.

Regardless of their grade, everyone in the Royal Class held their breath.

Harriet, a first-year magic major who was performing well in the Unrestricted Class Tournament.

Olivia Lanze, who rightfully carried the title of the strongest in the Temple.

The two of them stood facing each other in the arena.

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Harriet found herself face to face with Olivia Lanze, who wore a faint smile on her face. In contrast to Harriet's hardened expression, her opponent's face was brimming with composure.

Harriet didn't like her arrogant demeanor.

'Was I like that once?'

There was a time when everything in the world seemed petty and laughable compared to herself.

From birth, everything was determined, and she couldn't understand why others struggled so desperately.

She had a period where she simply scoffed at others without trying to understand them. She couldn't say she had completely abandoned her past self, but she was aware that she needed to change.

Her opponent was arrogant.

Of course, as the nickname "Saint of Eredian" implied, Olivia was known as a selfless person. However, for some reason, she acted as if she were a terrible person when it came to matters involving Reinhardt.

She openly provoked Ellen.

And intentionally ignored herself.

That expression she made every time.

With a subtle smile, she hid her true feelings and only tried to provoke others.

Harriet knew her chances of winning were slim. She had seen that monster fight.

But that mask.

The horribly thick and repulsive mask that became more sinister.

Whether it was out of anger, resentment, or frustration.

She would reveal that mask at least once.

She wouldn't let her keep ignoring her with that kind of expression forever.

Now, the last match of Group C of the Round 8 begins!

Olivia Lanze stared at Harriet silently.

"I don't like dragging things out. I'll end this quickly."

Olivia's body was covered in blue mana.

The dense mana enveloped her.

She didn't like dragging things out.

Harriet couldn't believe what Olivia had said.

"Isn't that a strange thing to say for someone who clings to Reinhardt so persistently?"

"Ah, that?"

With a smile, Olivia didn't rush towards her but instead walked slowly.

"I cling to him because I like him enough to do something I truly dislike."

"…"

"Can't you say the same?"

With a dazzling smile, Olivia continued to approach Harriet.

A person who is honest with their feelings.

A person who can be honest.

A person who is willing to push forward even if their feelings hurt others.

Someone who accepts that gaining something means losing something else, and is willing to hurt both herself and Ellen to have Reinhardt.

Harriet was suddenly struck by a sense of envy towards Olivia.

However, it subsided as quickly as it had arisen. Her opponent was simply provoking her.

At the very moment that Harriet tried to stop thinking about her opponent's words in order to maintain her composure,

Olivia lightly stomped on the ground.

-Tat!

The sound was soft.

-Swish!

But her rushing speed was anything but light.

-Ching!

As the protection activated in front of Harriet's eyes, Olivia's fist tore through the blue barrier.

-Crash!

"!"

As the protection collapsed in an instant, Olivia's fist rushed toward Harriet's face.

Thud!

Just before the attack was about to land, Harriet used Blink to create distance in the nick of time. Olivia turned around and smiled at Harriet, who was breaking out in a cold sweat.

"You're fast."

Casting Blink the moment the protection shattered was impressive.

However, unlike the leisurely Olivia, Harriet didn't have the luxury of playing games with her.

Zap!

A bolt of lightning struck Olivia's body.

It was the strategy Harriet had used in the first match. Creating distance with Blink and then casting multiple offensive spells to strip away the opponent's Magic Body Strengthening.

Many opponents had been caught off-guard by this simple strategy in the preliminary matches.

If she feared close combat, she just had to avoid it.

Once the lightning spell was cast, the impact was almost instantaneous. Evading it was nearly impossible. Of course, an ordinary person would be knocked unconscious or killed by the lightning, but an opponent with Magic Body Strengthening was different.

Using a powerful fireball to incapacitate the opponent would be ideal.

So far, it had worked without fail.

However, as if the lightning bolt was nothing, Olivia relentlessly charged at Harriet again. She didn't even flinch.

Naturally, Harriet had anticipated this to some extent.

Boom!

As Harriet swung her hand, the ground surged, and a stone wall formed.

The protection was easily penetrated.

So, she created a physical barrier instead.

Without a strategy, her opponent relied on her overwhelming physical prowess.

"Do you think you can stop me with this?"

Crash!

Breaking through the stone wall with her bare hands, Olivia charged toward Harriet.

'I'm not trying to stop you.'

Harriet had already cast another spell during that brief moment.

She knew she couldn't stop Olivia with a wall.

Her opponent's strength was overwhelming.

If she couldn't win with force, she'd find another way.

The purpose of the wall was to disappear from Olivia's line of sight.

The spell she used was Hallucination, causing illusions to make her presence undetectable.

Magic was limitless.

She'd confuse her opponent's perception and make her lose by stepping out of bounds.

Right now, her opponent shouldn't be able to perceive her. She had vanished after Olivia broke through the wall.

But then…

As Harriet cast the spell, she felt it.

'Resistance…?'

The spell aimed at Olivia was deflected.

How?

It was a mid-to-high-level mental spell.

It shouldn't have been so easily resisted.

Harriet had no choice but to watch Olivia's fist flying towards her.

Olivia won the first set after a brief battle.

After being recalled and then called onto the battlefield, Harriet stared blankly at Olivia's smiling face.

The illusion-type magic that was higher-ranking than Illusion did not have a reduced effect; it had no effect at all.

"I have a pretty good idea of what you were trying to do."

As if she was going to reveal a secret, Olivia placed her hands on her hips and spoke to Harriet.

"Almost all mental magic doesn't work on me. How adorable, junior."

The moment she heard those words, Harriet felt as if her brain had frozen.

It was not well-known that Olivia Lanze had immunity-level resistance to mental magic.

It was only natural that Harriet would be unaware of this.

But as a result of not knowing, all the plans Harriet had prepared had vanished completely.

She had thought that mental magic would be the solution since she couldn't compete physically, but it had no effect on her opponent at all.

It couldn't be a bluff. Harriet had definitely felt the magic she cast had no influence whatsoever.

She had anticipated some resistance, but she never expected it to be completely ineffective.

"Why do you have such an incredulous expression? The world is like that, isn't it? Everyone has something they're born with. This place gathers people who were born with something."

The Temple.

The Royal Class of that place was a gathering spot for such individuals.

"Just like you're an unbelievable person in your own way, I can't help but be an unbelievable person in my own way, right?"

The second set was about to begin.

"If that's all you've prepared, you should just forfeit."

Olivia's smile never faded.

"Before you end up in a more pathetic state."

In an already disadvantageous situation, she had discovered in the first set that her secret weapon was ineffective.

It was desperate.

Magic immunity. She thought only a guy named Scarlett from B-Class possessed such a talent, but there was another person with a similar talent.

Having lost her only hope, Harriet's mind was in chaos.

“Don't! Panic!”

Then, a shout pierced through her chaotic mind.

From one side of the audience seats.

A familiar voice could be heard.

She knew who it was without looking.

There was only one person in the world who would call her that way.

“Don't be scared!”

That person was shouting towards her. It wasn't a word of encouragement to win, nor to cheer up.

It was just a message not to be scared. That in itself wasn't really encouragement at all.

However.

"Tsk."

Seeing Olivia Lanze's expression slightly distorted by the same shout, Harriet could tell.

Reinhardt had said that in times like these, people would naturally root for the weaker side.

He had said it with a bit of sorrow since it was a statement that confirmed her own defeat.

However.

In the end, the world was all about results.

Reinhardt was cheering for her.

Don't be scared and just go for it!

Reinhardt was cheering for Harriet de Saint Owan, not Olivia Lanze.

"Is this what it feels like to feel like a winner even when you lose?"

"…”

Seeing Olivia's hardened expression, Harriet smiled.

The smile vanished from Olivia's face. Gone were the playful taunts and snide remarks.

Although Harriet's confusion was quelled by Reinhardt's shout, the outcome could have been even worse for Harriet.

"This is just sad."

Olivia Lanze was angry now.

At Harriet.

At Reinhardt.

"I'm annoyed. Let's finish this quickly."

The declaration for the start of the second set had already been made.

Olivia charged again.

This time, Harriet didn't cast Protection. An array of blue mana lines formed on her hand, giving off a faint blue light.

"Ha!"

-Crash!

"!"

In an instant, the arena cracked and crumbled.

"Ugh!"

As the off-balance Olivia Lanze stumbled, Harriet spread her hands.

The spell she had just cast was Shockwave.

It had destroyed the terrain.

It was by no means a low-level spell.

And now, another high-level spell unfolded.

One set.

There was no turning back. She would do whatever it took to claim this set.

Harriet reached her hands towards the sky.

A massive flame, incomparable to a Fireball.

"Take this!"

Flame Strike hurtled towards the staggering Olivia Lanze.

-Kaboom!

A massive fiery explosion engulfed Olivia Lanze.

The blue mana lines on Harriet's hand and arm shone brilliantly.

The audience had been rendered speechless by the sudden destruction of the arena and the subsequent overpowering Flame Strike.

"This is impossible."

Saviolin Turner, who had been watching the situation, spoke briefly.

"No matter how much of a genius Harriet de Saint-Owan may be, casting destruction spells of that magnitude and that quickly is impossible."

"Are you suggesting she cheated?"

"Well… but it certainly doesn't look like a conventional way of using magic. Just looking at the markings that suddenly appeared on the student's body…"

As Saviolin Turner had pointed out, blue symbols had appeared on Harriet's hand. They were gone now.

She had cast large-scale destruction spells in rapid succession, with virtually no time delay. Ellen, Reinhardt, and even Liana were all taken aback by the spectacle.

"Could it be… Harriet…”

I grabbed Ellen's shoulder and shook it.

"Did she… did she just use some kind of tattoo?"

"…?"

I think Harriet used a tattoo or something!

Well, there's nothing she shouldn't be able to do!

She can do it! She can do it! But still!

"Is that really what's important right now?"

"But, but!"

Liana's scolding made me want to cry. There were definitely people here who knew what was going on.

"Louis! What's going on here? What did you guys do to our blockhead in the Magic Research Society?"

At my scream, which was close to a shriek, Louis turned around from the front seat.

I never expected this kind of reaction.

"Ah, no… Why are you so upset?"

Louis let out a deep sigh, as if to calm himself down.

"It's an application of scroll magic."

“…What are you talking about?"

Louis explained while looking at Harriet, who was standing on one side of the

collapsed arena.

"Harriet is, well, she's writing and using magic scrolls in real time."

This is…

What kind of bizarre thing is this?

What on earth did they do to our blockhead at the Magic Research Club?

Not only Reinhardt, but the Duke and Duchess were also in confusion.

So, they couldn't even pay attention to Reinhardt who was cursing their daughter on the side.

"Our child… What is that?"

"Well… I'm not quite sure."

The Duke, who was well-versed in magic, couldn't even understand what kind of bizarre thing his daughter had done to her body.

No one had ever seen or heard of such a sight before. Of course, the Duke wasn't as shocked as Reinhardt.

He was a magician before he was a nobleman. Thus, he lived his life according to the way magicians think.

"It seems our daughter has already caused a surprising incident in the world."

The outcome of this fight is not important.

The Duke of Saint Owan had an intuition that his daughter had developed a new line of magic that had never existed before.

Casting.

It is the beginning and the end of magic.

However, casting ultimately takes time, so no matter how fast it becomes, it cannot be reduced to zero. Magic is a great and convenient power, but when used for combat, there is a fatal flaw in the form of casting time.

If given enough time, magic can destroy anything.

Thus, battle mages with extraordinary abilities often die in vain because the preparation time for casting is so pressing.

Casting is a natural process. It is impossible to even think of eliminating it.

It is no different from nonsense that comes up with the answer without the formula.

However, Harriet knew of her senior's example.

Royal class 2-A class, number 1, Redina.

Her talent is no casting.

It's called Supernatural power, but Harriet had seen with her own eyes that it was possible.

Magic that manifests simultaneously with thought.

If that is possible, there is nothing impossible for her.

But there was no way to gain Supernatural power.

Harriet, like many battle mages before her, sought to dramatically reduce casting time.

Of course, she didn't acquire Supernatural powers.

She just found a solution elsewhere.

In the Magic Research Club, Harriet racked her brains with everyone else.

It was Louis, not Harriet, who found the answer. Louis Ancton, who understood

magic but couldn't use it himself.

That's why his way of thinking is different from that of ordinary magicians.

"Scroll magic can be activated instantly, right?"

"That's correct."

"Scrolls are essentially magical circles drawn on paper imbued with mana, right?"

"Yep."

"But the human body already contains mana, doesn't it?"

"Yes, so?"

"What if we treat the human body as a scroll, and draw magical circles on it to activate spells?"

"…?"

"Huh?"

Louis Ancton's suggestion was met with incredulous reactions from everyone.

But the idea itself wasn't entirely wrong.

A scroll is fundamentally created by drawing a magical circle on a medium imbued with mana.

Mana-imbued medium - Paper

Magical circle - Formula

If the medium is the human body, and the formula is drawn directly on it, then it's a highly intuitive understanding that the magic would activate. However, this bizarre proposition was something even Harriet, who had a profound understanding of magic, couldn't comprehend.

"Dettomorian said that the warriors of his tribe had warpaint, tattoos drawn by

shamans, that granted them extraordinary powers."

"I know that shamanism is the root of magic, but… Are you saying that these warpaints drew magical circles on their bodies to harness power, even though I don't know what they are?"

"Yep, I heard it actually works. If the warpaint uses the mana within a person's body, then ultimately, what I'm talking about isn't much different, is it?"

Louis merely threw out the idea. To reduce casting time, he proposed using the human body as a scroll so that it functions like a scroll itself.

It was such a radical idea. Adelia tilted her head at Louis's words.

"But if we assume that it works, and we can inscribe a Fireball spell and activate it, would that person only be able to use Fireball? To use other spells as well…"

"They'd be covered in tattoos…"

Everyone's expressions turned grim, as it was clear that it wouldn't be a pleasant sight.

Even if it worked, it was a fact that one would have to be covered in tattoos to inscribe numerous spells on their body.

"Besides, we can't even learn scroll magic."

It was Christina who spoke. Magic related to scrolls was top secret, and even the temple couldn't teach it. So, whether it worked or not, it was still a type of magic they couldn't learn at the moment.

"No."

However, Harriet shook her head at that.

"We don't have to inscribe magical circles; we can inscribe 'language.'"

Language.

Everyone was again puzzled by this unexpected suggestion.

"By inscribing language, we can create a magic system that allows for the derivation of countless spells just by combining the necessary character sequences."

As she said this, everyone couldn't help but understand what Harriet was talking about.

An ancient magic system, older than shamanism but not as much, which was the true origin of magic.

"We just need to carve runes."

With runes, it's possible to implement all the magic that exists in the world.

CHAPTER 311

My Body Becomes a Magic Scroll

Instead of managing the complex flow of magical power on my own every time I cast a spell, I simply call upon the runes engraved on my body and inject them with magical power. The spell is then activated.

My flesh is like paper, and the characters form a magic circle.

It's not quite a casting-free level, but it's close.

A previously unseen magic system that grafts rune magic and scroll magic onto the human body.

Louis Ancton, the one who initially conceived the idea, insisted that it wouldn't work.

Magic has evolved, and the use of runes is too primitive.

Discarding the developed system and reverting to the primitive method of implementing modern magic with the ancient language is too inefficient.

First, the modern magic must be reinterpreted and reverse-engineered into runes. Naturally, a deep understanding of runes was required.

Harriet could do it.

The prestigious Saint Owan Archduke of Magic emphasized the importance of runes from a very young age, so Harriet had been studying them for her entire life. Although she wasn't quite at the level of a dedicated rune scholar, her understanding was profound.

But more than that, she had to memorize an enormous amount of rune formulas to activate and rearrange them as needed.

Harriet could do that, too.

Memorizing was far too easy for her.

As a result, Harriet's body, rather than her mind, now performed most of the actual work needed after magical calculations. All that was needed was to memorize the countless combinations of magical runes.

Her body was an infinite magic scroll, as long as the magical power permitted.

That's why Harriet, without the supernatural ability of no-casting, obtained power rivaling that of Redina.

-Krrrrrr

It wasn't over yet. Harriet reached out her hand towards the thick smoke rising from the collapsed arena.

Blue magical lines formed runes on her right arm as they etched into her skin. The more extensive the magic, the larger the magical lines that covered her body.

Now Harriet's entire right upper and lower arm was glowing with runes.

-Krrrrrrng

Magic restructured into runes and activated.

Thunderstrike.

Not a simple bolt, but a thunderstrike from the sky to finish it off. The once clear sky suddenly darkened, causing people to start murmuring.

-Flash!

A single streak of lightning struck the arena.

-Kwrrrrrrrrng!

Immediately after, a deafening thunderclap shook the arena, as the lightning strike expanded the air.

For a moment, silence followed at the site of the strike.

"…"

"Ha…"

Soon after, Harriet revealed a smile as she looked at Olivia, emerging from the debris.

Though victory had yet to be decided, she was confident that she had successfully landed a blow.

Olivia Lanze, battered and bruised, emerged from the rubble of the collapsed arena.

"This… really pisses me off…"

Although Harriet had successfully struck Olivia, the fact remained that Olivia Lanze was still a monster.

With her bare body, Olivia withstood both Flame Strike and Thunder Strike. Flame Strike was a large-scale destruction spell, and Thunder Strike was a powerful, albeit narrow-range, offensive spell designed for single targets.

But Olivia managed to endure both.

The audience couldn't help but be astounded by the fact that even in an Unrestricted-class match, there was a person who could cast such high-level destruction spells and another who could withstand them with her bare body.

The smile on Olivia's lips disappeared.

It was as if the playtime was over.

Once again, lines of magical power began to form on both of Harriet's arms, which were hidden beneath her sleeves.

The arena had collapsed, and the area beyond it no longer held any meaning.

Harriet would lose if she allowed even one attack, and Olivia would lose if her seemingly impenetrable barrier of Magic Body Strengthening disappeared.

The current state of the arena was in Harriet's favor.

The uneven terrain made it difficult for Olivia, who had to close the distance, to move.

However, Olivia was unaffected by such mundane standards.

Leaping as if she were flying, Olivia approached Harriet without faltering a single step.

Of course, Harriet, who had engraved magic directly onto her own body for use – an unprecedented feat – was also no ordinary person.

Harriet cast a spell at the exact spot where Olivia was about to land.

It was a simple telekinesis spell.

-Thump!

With a dull sound, the rock Olivia was supposed to land on suddenly shot out to the right.

“!”

It was as if her foothold had suddenly disappeared.

-Thunk!

“Ugh!”

Olivia stumbled and fell flat on her face.

Falling face-first in the midst of an intense battle was a potentially fatal situation.

However, Olivia's fall was so comical and unexpected that it created a humorous scene.

“…Heh."

Instead of casting an offensive spell, Harriet laughed at the sight of Olivia.

"Wow… really…”

As Olivia staggered to her feet, she looked at Harriet, who wore a mocking smile.

She couldn't have even imagined that she would be laughed at like this.

By a little girl like her.

By a mere mage.

"Really."

"Freaking."

"Annoying…?"

A dark fire ignited in Olivia's heart.

With tensed neck and forehead muscles, Olivia clenched her teeth and approached Harriet calmly once more. This time, she wouldn't fall for the same trick. The previous attack had been unexpected.

Being cautious would be enough to prevent such a small exploit.

In a matter of moments, Olivia closed the distance and lunged at Harriet, who vanished using a short-range teleportation spell.

However, the moment Harriet completed her teleportation, she found herself face-to-face with a massive boulder.

It was too late.

There wasn't even enough time to cast a spell.

-Swish!

It wasn't Harriet's quick reflexes that allowed her to dodge the flying rock, but rather, the rock's trajectory simply missed her.

The speed of the rock was so great that, had it struck an ordinary person, it could have shattered their skull and killed them.

"It didn't hit," Olivia said, her tone tinged with disappointment.

Knowing that Harriet would use short-range teleportation to escape when she got close, Olivia had aimed the rock at the moment Harriet teleported away.

Fortunately, the distance was too great for her to hit her target.

Harriet felt a shiver down her spine.

Her opponent was gradually finding ways to counter her repeated patterns of attack, exploiting weaknesses, and evading.

The moment she teleported, in the brief gap upon arrival, Olivia was able to target her with a rock.

Next time, it wouldn't miss.

This was the end.

Her remaining magical energy wasn't much. She had already used many powerful spells.

"You seem to be running low on magic energy, huh?"

Olivia was also aware of Harriet's condition.

-Thud!

As Olivia advanced, Harriet chose to use the terrain rather than offensive magic.

She lifted the debris from the arena with telekinesis and threw it.

-Bang! Crash!

Olivia shattered the debris, which was as solid as rock, as she continued to advance.

Ellen had at least used the divine sword Lament to break walls and cut through doors.

But Olivia Lanze was doing this with her bare hands. There was a limit to how much

arena debris she could throw at the approaching Olivia.

However, it seemed that Harriet had no other choice but to continue hurling debris. Olivia broke through the debris and continued to advance.

As a result, a thick cloud of dust was inevitable.

Olivia reached Harriet, who once again escaped with a blink, and gritted her teeth.

"Annoying."

Olivia, seeing her vision obscured by the dust, guessed that this was Harriet's intention.

In this state, she couldn't determine in which direction her opponent had moved. The spectators also couldn't properly understand what was happening due to the dust.

"Huff…"

Suddenly, the blue magical energy surrounding Olivia exploded.

-Kaboom!

Just like when Saviollin Turner fought the darkness-possessed Charlotte.

The magical shockwave blasted away the dispersing dust in an instant.

Olivia swept away the dust as if clearing fog and observed Harriet, who had reappeared on the opposite side.

Now, the arena had completely vanished, reduced to a chaotic mess.

"Nothing left to throw?"

From Olivia's perspective, Harriet looked too exhausted to teleport, resorting to weak attacks by throwing large debris with telekinesis.

However, Olivia had destroyed all the boulder-sized debris.

All that remained were small rocks.

The era of short-range teleportation and shallow tricks like raising dust clouds to escape was over.

At this point, she had dealt with the little magician for far too long.

"You don't have to throw anymore."

However, Harriet was smiling.

"I've already thrown everything."

“…What?"

Thrown everything? What exactly?

It was only then that Olivia noticed the stones embedded in the ground around her, despite the magic shockwave she had released.

These stones should have been blown away by the shockwave, but they remained in place.

Olivia looked around.

Amidst the scattered fragments and stone pieces, she couldn't discern much.

Yet, there was an odd regularity in the shapes of the fragments.

"I'm almost out of magic, but it's something that can be done without using my magic."

Harriet had thrown the fragments.

And she had secretly arranged the scattered fragments so that Olivia wouldn't notice.

The method of using natural mana.

Reinhardt had told her to discover it, but Harriet still couldn't do it.

However, wasn't there a method of using natural mana from the beginning?

In the form of magical circles.

Magical circles are used for various purposes, but large-scale magical circles are originally designed to draw and use natural mana.

In the short time, Harriet had accomplished the incredible feat of setting up a magical circle in the stadium.

Uuuung

"This can't be…!"

Olivia could only dumbfoundedly watch as the magical circle, now set up over a vast area, began to react.

"I've won."

With Harriet's smile, the magical circle she had set up emitted a blue light and took its final form.

The magic was activated.

Inferno.

A higher-tier fire destruction magic than Flame Strike.

It was so widespread that there was no way to avoid it.

Olivia knew it too.

This was a disaster.

As she watched the crimson flames beginning to flicker at her feet, Olivia cried out with a grimace.

"Youuuuu…! Just you wait!"

"People who say 'just you wait' are the least scary!"

The conversation at the end of their meticulous and fierce battle was excessively childish.

Kwarrrrr!

The crimson inferno engulfed Olivia and soared into the sky.

Olivia couldn't endure this magic.

Harriet de Saint Owan takes the second set!

The audience stared blankly at the eerie flame columns, writhing like snake tongues, reaching for the sky.

Harriet was not familiar with the fights themselves, but she knew well what was important in them.

Conceal your information as much as possible.

Harriet had hidden her trump card well. She had concealed her abilities to the utmost, leading to a surprise attack. While making Olivia believe that throwing fragments was her only remaining offensive strategy, she hid her true intent to set up a large-scale magical circle on the ground.

However, in the end, it was a stroke of luck.

Olivia had underestimated Harriet, and Harriet had made good use of deception.

There, of course, Olivia had not used her divine power until the end. Had she used her divine power, she could have survived Harriet's final attack.

In the end, Olivia had underestimated her opponent and faced defeat while under numerous constraints.

Regardless of the outcome, the fight had been the most spectacular of the tournament so far, and the excitement of the audience was at its peak.

The set score was 1:1.

Olivia would not be careless anymore.

Harriet and Olivia were summoned back to the restored stadium through restoration magic.

Olivia glared at Harriet as if she would devour her in an instant.

She would no longer be careless, underestimate her opponent, or be deceived by tricks.

Seeing Olivia, who was just waiting for the match to start, Harriet suddenly raised her hand.

"I forfeit."

It was only natural that Olivia's face would turn pale at those words.

"You, you! Don't! Don't forfeit!"

"I'm too tired to continue."

Lacking magic power was no excuse.

In Reinhardt's case, he couldn't recover from the adverse condition caused by Magic Body Strengthening, but ordinary magic depletion could be solved by a standby magician using a mana-replenishing spell called Siphon Mana.

An unexpected declaration of forfeit.

Uh… Well, due to Harriet de Saint Owan's forfeit, Olivia Lanze is declared the winner of Group C in the main tournament…

Of course, they couldn't force a player to fight if they didn't want to.

"Don't forfeit! You! I said don't!"

No matter how much Olivia screamed and pleaded, Harriet had no intention of fighting further.

Harriet could not beat Olivia.

"Fine, just one more set, just one more! If you win the next set, I'll admit you've won! I'll forfeit then!"

"Why should I? I don't want to. You can't even fight properly."

"Ahhhhhh!"

Harriet's goal was never to defeat Olivia, but to make herself undeniable.

Harriet had succeeded in that.

CHAPTER 312

The Group C main round had come to an end.

Therefore, neither Olivia, who had advanced to the semi-finals of tomorrow's tournament, nor Harriet, who had forfeited, had any business at the tournament venue.

"You, you're really a bad person, you know that, right?"

"I only did it for my sister."

"That, that is…! Still! You're also bad!"

Olivia's face flushed red as she followed Harriet reluctantly. Olivia hadn't won, but rather had victory thrust upon her.

That's why, even though she had won, she felt like she had lost. No, it was more like she had lost because she had won.

Harriet spoke while glancing at Olivia, who was whining by her side.

"Be quiet. The match is over, don't bother me and go your own way."

"…You! I'll get my revenge, just you wait!"

Olivia, despite being the winner, made an excuse like a loser and ran out of the tournament venue as if escaping.

Harriet looked at Olivia's retreating figure and laughed.

Still, she thought Olivia had some self-control.

Although she seemed furious from head to toe, during the match, she had charged at Harriet as if wanting to kill her, but now that the match was over, she hadn't laid a finger on Harriet.

When someone is that angry, they might lose their composure and try to hurt themselves or others.

Instead, she seemed unable to bear her own anger and chose to run away.

It seemed like she was a person who at least knew her limits and abided by them, but her behavior didn't entirely reflect that.

'Such a strange person… '

Harriet still couldn't quite grasp whether Olivia Lanze was a good or bad person.

Of course, whether she was good or bad, it was clear that she didn't like her.

As they exited the main stadium, a crowd of Royal Class first-year students had gathered.

Reinhardt shouted out.

"Damn! You did it, Harriet!"

Despite losing.

Everyone wore expressions as if she herself had won.

"I always believed in you!"

“…You were the one who believed the least."

"Uh, well. Ahem! Ahem!"

At Reinhardt's excited shout, not only Ellen but all the other students stared at him as well.

Harriet knew that Reinhardt had been anxious and restless.

Everyone gathered around Harriet, praising her for her outstanding performance and lifting her spirits.

Even without the use of Divine Power by Olivia, taking a set from Olivia, who had

been looking down on her, was an incredible feat.

Of course, it wasn't just the students who came to greet Harriet.

"My baby!"

"Uh, um, Mom…"

Duchess Saint-Owan embraced Harriet tightly. Harriet knew that her parents were in the audience and that they would come to see her, so she wasn't too flustered.

However, being called "baby" in front of everyone made Harriet's face turn bright red.

"You did great, my baby. Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Ah, please, don't call me baby…"

Due to the arrival of Harriet's parents, the students stealthily backed away and watched the scene.

If they knew that she was treated like this at home, the situation would become even more unbearable.

Duke Saint Owan, too, watched with a proud smile, for his daughter had grown remarkably, and it was clear that he didn't know what to do with himself out of pride.

For a while, the Duchess of Saint Owan fussed over Harriet, checking for injuries and praising her performance. She hugged Harriet and then looked at someone.

"But… Reinhardt?"

"…Ah, yes! Oh, it's been a long time since we last met!"

Everyone was surprised that the Duchess knew Reinhardt.

It's been a long time since they met?

When and under what circumstances did Reinhardt have the opportunity to meet

Harriet's mother directly?

Reinhardt's face turned pale and rigid.

"If I heard correctly… the person you called 'Blockhead' is our child…"

At that, Reinhardt's already pale face turned almost green.

The Duchess of Saint Owan looked at Reinhardt with a gentle and tender smile.

"Is that true?"

"Uh, that… that's… um…"

"Yes, it's true."

The answer came not from Harriet or Reinhardt, but from Ellen.

Reinhardt looked at Ellen, frozen.

You're trying to get me killed, aren't you?

Despite his gaze, Ellen pretended not to notice and avoided the issue.

For some reason, Ellen's expression seemed quite displeased.

The Duchess's smile deepened, but it was an eerie smile, as if thousands of blades were hidden within it.

"Reinhardt, would you mind having a chat with me for a moment?"

"Well, the thing is… um, there's a story behind it…"

-Click

Before they knew it, Duke Saint Owan, who had been watching the situation with a contented smile, stepped forward and placed a hand on Reinhardt's shoulder.

"It must be quite a story for you to have no choice but to call my daughter 'Blockhead.'"

Duke Saint Owan's expression hardened menacingly.

"Indeed, it must be quite a story."

It had to be an incredible story, Duke Saint Owan conveyed with just his eyes.

"Please kill me."

Reinhardt finally gave in.

He wasn't beaten to death.

But when the Duchess said she hadn't known her daughter had such a cute nickname while patting my shoulder, it felt more chilling than having a knife at my throat.

Harriet didn't know what to do.

Defending me or not defending me would both make her look odd.

Yes.

It was only now that he was retroactively paying the price for having teased the daughter of a duke and a princess of a kingdom by calling her 'Blockhead.'

Duke Saint Owan didn't threaten to kill me if I called his daughter that again.

He just looked at me with a cold gaze.

His silence was even scarier.

"Sit down."

"Ah, yes."

But…

What am I doing here?

In a restaurant within the Temple.

I was sitting with the Saint Owan family. Naturally, Duke Saint Owan exchanged greetings with Charlotte and Saviolin Turner, whom he knew, and then brought his daughter here for a meal.

And then…

Somehow, I ended up coming along as well.

I didn't intend to follow them.

They didn't ask me to come either.

It was just that Madam Saint Owan naturally pulled me along with them. She didn't even mention going for a meal, she just led us while suggesting we have a slow chat along the way, and we naturally arrived at the restaurant.

What is this?

What kind of situation is this?

Harriet seemed just as bewildered.

Why is this kid sitting here? No, why did Mom bring him along?

That was the expression on her face.

As if under a spell, the menu arrived, and Harriet and I absentmindedly toyed with our forks and knives.

Let's not say anything, let's not show any unnecessary curiosity.

If we say a word wrong, it might really become irreversible.

What is it?

Meeting Harriet's parents alone in Arlania, and now sitting here together.

Even if Harriet and I have promised to marry, isn't this sequence reversed?

"So, when did you manage to do that?"

"Yes, I'm curious about the details of the principle."

Fortunately, neither Madam Saint Owan nor the Duke seemed to have the leisure to pay attention to me, and I felt the same way.

Harriet set against Olivia. Her skills displayed there exceeded my expectations by far.

"Uh-huh… I didn't give it a name, but maybe I should call it an application of scroll magic to the human body?"

Harriet rolled up her right sleeve. No tattoo-like marks were visible.

However, as Harriet focused, blue magical lines appeared on her arm and began to form the shape of characters.

Duke Saint Owan looked at the complex string of characters and nodded as if he understood.

"Runes, I see."

"Yep."

"Are you saying that you reverse-engineered modern magic into runic language?"

"Yep."

Duke Saint Owan was probably the only one who truly understood how difficult that was. That's why he stared blankly as his daughter calmly replied.

Though she was his daughter, he seemed genuinely surprised by the impossible feat she had accomplished.

Harriet gave a subtle smile.

"I didn't do it alone. The Magic Research Club members helped a lot. The idea also came from someone else."

"The Magic Research Club…?"

Harriet looked in my direction.

"Yeah, the one he founded."

At that remark, Madam Saint Owan and the Duke's gaze fixed on me.

I did declare that your daughter would do something astonishing with the Magic Research Club.

It wasn't the way I wanted it, but Harriet had already accomplished something unbelievable. She had done so through collaboration with the members of the Magic Research Club.

In the end, I was right.

Duke Saint Owan and Harriet discussed the newly developed magic for some time.

For the most part, I couldn't understand any of it. However, I felt like I had an idea because I had heard a similar explanation from Louis.

She had turned her own body into a living, moving magic circle.

In reality, it was unclear how using magic in this way and turning one's body into a functioning magic circle could significantly reduce casting speed.

"Daughter, this must be a magical lineage that only you can use in this world. Ordinary magicians would take much longer to memorize all the contents of modern magic translated into runes and recall them when needed, compared to the traditional casting method. This approach may eliminate the stages of magic manipulation during the casting process, but the calculation process takes even longer."

“…Yeah, I suppose."

In the end, it was a method that relied on one's quick-witted intelligence. For ordinary magicians, this method would be more of a disadvantage.

It extends the formula and skips the actual magic manipulation steps.

For Harriet, it was a way to use magic almost instantaneously, but for other

magicians, it was a wasted effort.

Anyway, although she was called a genius, seeing Harriet accomplish something only possible for a real genius…

Somehow, it felt satisfying.

If she were to face Ellen, she was confident she could win.

Why did this situation, where she was sure she would lose in a fight, feel so good?

"Why do you and Mom and Dad have the same expression? It's, it's unpleasant…"

Apparently, Harriet noticed that both Duke Saint Owan and I had been wearing similar expressions and her face turned sour.

Madam Saint Owan, the Duke, and I.

It seemed that all three of us were feeling something similar at the moment.

"How is it? Can't breathe or anything?"

"I'm fine."

"…I have to hold my breath to wear something like this, but you don't even have that problem? Honestly, isn't this unfair to some extent?"

Liana dressed Ellen in a gown and stuck out her tongue, amazed at Ellen's relaxed demeanor despite wearing a tight dress.

The Miss Temple Contest was just a day away, a main event of the festival alongside the Unrestricted Tournament finals.

So Ellen and Liana were doing a final check together. As a result, Liana was busily moving between Ellen's room and Cliffman's room, feeling overwhelmed.

So Liana was the busiest person during this festival.

Reinhardt's tournament had ended, and Harriet's Unrestricted Tournament had ended as well.

Now, the only tasks left for the Royal Class first-years were Ellen and Cliff. As Liana touched Ellen's cheek, she looked at Ellen standing in front of the mirror.

"Loosen up your expression. Something bothering you?"

"No, not really."

Ellen looked at her reflection in the mirror.

It didn't seem too different from usual, but maybe it looked unhappy. Ellen tried to force a smile, but it didn't work well.

A natural smile had always been difficult for her. So when she forced a smile, it looked strange. It wasn't exactly an ugly expression, but it didn't look like a smiling face either.

But now, it was even harder to smile than usual.

Today, Reinhardt's image kept flickering in her mind.

'Haah… '

'Sigh… '

'Well, I guess you're not worried, are you?'

"What if our blockhead… loses? Huh? No, I mean, what if she suffers a crushing defeat?"

"Does she look nervous to you?"

"I get it! She's not nervous! Okay?"

"She's nervous again? When?"

The sight of him unable to sit still, filled with anxiety, and sighing heavily.

"Wow. What's with her? No, seriously, what is that?"

"What's going on? What happened?"

"Look! Our blockhead did it, didn't she?"

"I always believed in her!"

Watching Harriet, who was strong enough that he didn't have to worry, Reinhardt seemed overjoyed, as if he could jump for joy. It genuinely felt like he was worried for Harriet and rooting for her.

Ellen was surprised too. Although she had conceded, Harriet had managed to land a blow on Olivia.

If I were in her place, could I have done as well as Harriet?

Probably not, Ellen thought.

If I had been in that position…

Would Reinhardt have worried about me like he did today?

Would he have cheered me on like today?

He might have worried, but Ellen thought it wouldn't have been to the extent that he was restless like today.

Reinhardt was a bit overprotective of Harriet. He usually treated her roughly but worried about her during times like these.

Because she herself was good at everything, he wouldn't have worried that much.

He would have believed in her ability to pull through, even if she lost.

He worried more about Harriet and paid more attention to her because he was overprotective. Seeing Reinhardt like that, Ellen couldn't help but acknowledge the uncomfortable feeling that had already settled in her heart.

Jealousy.

She was jealous of Harriet.

That's why, today's events left her with the biggest question and a feeling of a stone lodged in her heart, one she couldn't shake off.

"It's been a while!"

Reinhardt seemed to be acquainted with Harriet's parents. Both the Duke and the Duchess were familiar with him.

Considering Harriet didn't seem surprised by this, she probably already knew about it.

How?

No, not just how, but why?

Why had Reinhardt met Harriet's parents?

Had he met them with Harriet? Why did they meet, and why had Reinhardt never mentioned it to her before?

Well, there's no particular reason for Reinhardt to tell her about it.

But still.

Even though she realized there was a lot she didn't know about Reinhardt.

She didn't want to be in the dark about this.

She didn't want to find out about it like this.

Of course, she wasn't the only one with questions.

"It's quite surprising that the Duke and Duchess know Reinhardt."

As Liana adjusted Ellen's clothes and matched various accessories, she made the comment in passing.

Everyone had been shocked to see Reinhardt being grabbed and dragged away by

the Duke in front of the stadium.

"It's possible they just happened to meet."

"Is that so?"

The reason she was most curious about was herself, and so Ellen said.

At some point, she started to lie. Pretending not to be curious when she was, acting as if nothing was wrong when it wasn't.

Ellen disliked how she was gradually changing. She started lying and hiding her emotions.

"But if he’s going to have dinner together with them, is Reinhardt close to the Duke's family?"

"…”

At Liana's words, Ellen clenched her teeth.

If she didn't do that, her face in the mirror seemed like it would twist strangely.

It was difficult to smile.

But it was possible for Ellen to show no expression at all.

"I think that's enough. I'll go check on Cliffman. He probably doesn't know how to dress himself, so he'll be struggling."

"Okay."

After Liana left her room, Ellen relaxed her jaw.

Ellen looked in the mirror.

She saw herself wearing a fancy dress, her shoulders exposed, adorned with flashy accessories like necklaces, earrings, and bracelets.

Not bad.

Although she thought so herself, Liana kept saying it would be strange if Ellen didn't become Miss Temple at this level.

She decided to discard all useless thoughts, jealousy, feelings of inferiority, and doubts.

Because they weren't helpful to her at all.

Ellen didn't care about anything else.

Looking at herself dressed like this, she wondered what Reinhardt would say, what expression he would wear.

That was all she was curious about.

Her appearance was a bit surprising even to herself, but she believed Reinhardt would surely be surprised as well.

After that, she was both afraid and somewhat hopeful about what he might say.

In her room, without Liana, Ellen tried to force a smile while looking in the mirror.

It still didn't work well, but the fact that she was trying was possible.

Just that alone made her feel like she would be able to smile someday.

Ellen continued practicing her smile in front of the mirror.

"……"

Olivia Lanze was lying on her bed in her room.

Olivia did win Group C of the main event today, but everyone knew she had seen quite an ugly scene.

Olivia Lanze, a 5th-year A-0 student.

Except for a few cases, Olivia was still kind and gentle to everyone. She hadn't

changed much from before.

However, knowing that Olivia might be a bit sensitive today, her classmates, who were younger in age but like siblings, didn't come to congratulate her.

So, now Olivia was alone.

Lying down, she stared blankly at the ceiling of her dorm room.

Assuming she used her divine power, she could have somehow endured the last magical attack.

No, she wouldn't have even gone that far in the first place.

Divine magic isn't limited to just healing and protection.

Furthermore.

Olivia raised her hand and saw the black smoke boiling from it.

The corrupted divine power.

Olivia could use that too.

If only Tiamata had been there.

To be humiliated by such a brat.

She had won but lost.

Declaring her forfeiture, she couldn't forget the expression on that cheeky girl's face.

She knew precisely that her victory would be completed by forfeit.

In the end, she won, but it was a loss, or rather, a disadvantage.

She had to give up one set and was defeated.

Therefore, it was a complete defeat.

Even if she were to win the tournament, the fact that she lost to Harriet would not change.

There was no point in thinking about it. What-ifs like "what would have happened if I had done this" or "what would have happened if I had done that" were meaningless.

I lost to Harriet de Saint-Owan.

That fact alone remained.

Though she felt like she had lost her motivation, she couldn't simply give up.

In the end, scolding those kids or defeating them wasn't her original goal.

She needed money.

Money.

If she won the tournament and was elected Miss Temple, she would receive a cash prize.

That was her original goal, after all. Focus only on that. The opponents in the semifinals and finals of the tournament wouldn't be easy either.

And she had to prepare for Miss Temple as well.

Olivia got up from her bed with a groan and opened her wardrobe.

Having sold all but the essentials, there was nothing in the wardrobe except her school uniform and ordinary daily clothes.

"If only I had the dress I wore to the sponsor's event…"

She had sold her belongings to help someone. She had sold all the dresses and accessories that her foster father had bought for her to wear at various events.

There was no reason to go that far.

But she couldn't find a reason not to.

She believed that her true needs couldn't be satisfied with material things.

That's why Olivia did it.

"Ha… ha…"

So, Olivia stared at her wardrobe, which contained nothing but her school uniform and daily clothes, and laughed feebly.

The Duke and Duchess of Saint-Owan didn't leave until they had finished dinner that evening. The Duke was a busy man, so it seemed obvious that he had made time to attend Harriet's tournament match.

"What?"

After seeing off the Duke and Duchess, Harriet blurted out.

"…What did I say? I didn't say anything."

"Now's the time to say something! What is it! What are you going to say! Tell me now!"

Since the Duke and Duchess were around, Harriet had been holding back, but now she thought it was time to let it out. Her face turned bright red as she panted.

"Uh, uh, uh… Mom's going to tease me for calling me like that…"

As she spoke, her lips trembled. Did she think I would definitely pick a fight, saying something like, "You're such a baby"?

"What's there to tease? You're a baby, after all."

"See, you're teasing me!"

It had been a while since she reacted so sharply.

How could I not tease her when she's like this? I couldn't help but keep talking!

"Try saying 'goo goo ga ga.' I bet you would without me."

"I won't! I won't do it! I don't do it at home either!"

Harriet's face turned bright red, and she sputtered. Yes, she probably wouldn't do it. I knew that. But she was overly susceptible to provocation and manipulation, that's what I meant.

However, getting frustrated over such things already made her a child.

She had become stronger, but her mentality was still the same, which was amusing.

"Try doing it then?"

"No way! Why would I do that at this age!"

…What?

Why is a seventeen-year-old talking about her age so adorable?

This is really like baby talk!

I stopped teasing her further since she might start shooting magic spells at me if provoked any more. After all, controlling the intensity of such situations was necessary.

On the way back to the Royal Class dormitory.

People were still bustling about. The crowd would only grow larger until Friday.

Today's Unrestricted Class Tournament Group C finals would have been quite a topic of discussion. From what I saw, it was a fight of a different dimension compared to the other matches.

A first-year student firing magic spells at a speed close to instant.

A fifth-year student charging like a tank while taking all the spells with her bare body.

Regardless of anything else, it was truly incredible.

"But… it's strange?"

As Harriet walked quietly, she murmured.

"What's strange?"

"Mom calling me like that. Don't you think it's strange…?"

What?

Was she still thinking about that? Harriet seemed genuinely embarrassed by it. Well, it might be a headache-inducing problem for her.

The Duke and Duchess of Saint-Owan continued to treat Harriet like a child.

However, that was an issue that couldn't be helped.

Seeing Harriet's embarrassment, I smirked.

"Why is it strange for a parent to love their child?"

"…"

The Duke, who appeared stoic and stern, couldn't hide his love for his daughter.

The Duchess, who seemed unable to part with Harriet even for a moment, kept embracing her.

Harriet seemed to dislike that scene, but I enjoyed watching it.

Of course, the question remains why I had to watch that spectacle from beginning to end.

"Most children who grow up in such an environment tend to be spoiled, you know?"

"You, what are you trying to say!"

"You aren't really spoiled, are you?"

She seemed to have grown up in a problematic environment in many ways, but is it a

crime for parents to love their child? And Harriet wasn't like that now, at least not in this version.

"Your choice of words is nice, but why do you always express it like that? Spoiled? I've never heard such a thing in my life!"

Naturally, Harriet was furious at my words.

It's amusing to say that there's no problem since your parents are good people and you grew up well in such a manner.

At this rate, I might have a disease where I can't speak straightforwardly and kindly, right?

But how can I stop when I see her getting red and furious?

Bickering like this, we returned to the Royal Class dormitory.

It was winter.

And it was nighttime.

So, it was cold.

"It's cold."

"It's winter, you idiot. Of course, it's cold."

"Do I have to hear you call me an idiot just because I said it's cold?"

“Although others might not know, you shouldn't be the one saying that to me, especially not after teasing me so many times with nonsense!"

Harriet began to argue again. Well, this time she did start it.

Today's weather felt particularly cold. It was the middle of winter, night, and we were dressed lightly. Both Harriet and I had white breaths in the air.

At this rate, how much colder would it get?

Of course, this wasn't the extreme cold of the polar regions, and the weather wouldn't be that severe.

Come to think of it, magic is godlike, isn't it?

There's no need to be cold just because it's cold, right?

I lightly tapped Harriet, who was walking quietly beside me.

"Hey, it's cold."

“…What?"

"It's cold."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"Why not do something?"

Harriet stared back at me, clearly annoyed.

During our time on the uninhabited island, Harriet had summoned a heat-generating sphere and put it in the children's tent.

Regardless of race or tribe, magic is the best. As I asked Harriet to do something, she stuck out her lips and slowly closed her eyes.

It seemed like she might summon the heat-generating sphere from the uninhabited island again.

"…”

Suddenly, Harriet grabbed my hand.

She couldn't even look at me, her head hung low.

No.

Not this.

When I first awakened my Magic Body Strengthening and was in unbearable pain, I asked her to put me to sleep, but instead of using a sleep spell, she unexpectedly sang a lullaby.

When I realized the misunderstanding, I felt like I could have died of embarrassment.

Was she misunderstanding my request for magic again?

"No, hey… not this, but magic…"

"I know."

Her words stopped me in my tracks.

"I'm… not that stupid…"

Her voice trembled, as if it would break at any moment.

She held my hand even though she knew I was asking for magic.

With her head down, Harriet held my hand and led the way.

She didn't grip too tightly. She couldn't hold it tighter, nor could she let go. I quietly followed Harriet, who was leading the way with my hand in hers.

"How was your day today?"

Harriet asked.

"It was the best."

I answered sincerely, without any pretense.

"…"

"…"

We didn't exchange any more words after that.

Silently, we just walked.

The dormitory was quite a distance away, requiring a tram ride.

However, Harriet walked past the tram stop and continued walking.

As if she wanted to walk forever.

As if she hoped the place we needed to return to would never appear.

CHAPTER 313

One couldn't spend the entire day dressing up and applying makeup for the Miss Temple contest.

After taking off her dress and removing her makeup, Ellen finished taking a shower.

Liana had her practice not only the dress code and makeup, but also her facial expressions. Thorough preparation was essential.

Despite not having done much, Ellen felt extremely exhausted, both physically and mentally, due to her unfamiliarity with the tasks.

That didn't mean she disliked it, though.

It felt like discovering an entirely different side of herself she had been unaware of. Today alone, she had looked in the mirror dozens of times, wondering if it was really her.

After drying her hair, Ellen obediently lay down on the bed.

The Miss Temple contest would start tomorrow.

-Growl

Ellen furrowed her brow at the sound coming from her stomach.

It would usually be time to eat a late-night snack with Reinhardt. Ellen recalled Liana's stern warning.

"Don't eat anything you pick up tonight."

“…Why?"

"I know you don't gain weight easily, but if you eat something and your face swells up tomorrow, what will you do?"

“…I'm not sure."

"Anyway, just don't eat. You can endure it for just one day."

It wasn't that hard to refrain from eating a late-night snack. She could certainly endure it for a day.

But routines were powerful.

-Growl

"…”

Her body sent signals at the time she usually ate, but she wasn't allowed to eat now.

Moreover, when someone tells you not to do something, the desire only becomes stronger.

She had gone to bed without a late-night snack before, but today, knowing she couldn't eat, made her even hungrier.

Ellen was typically good at self-control. She didn't gain weight easily due to her exercise routine and constitution, and the Royal Class dormitory always had abundant food supplies. Besides, Reinhardt, who would do anything she asked, had been with her for quite some time.

Ellen realized she had rarely resisted eating recently.

Still, she needed to show a better version of herself tomorrow. She couldn't let hunger get the best of her.

She tried to force herself to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come easily.

Wondering if it was because of the moonlight pouring through the window, Ellen grumbled as she got up to close the curtains.

And then.

As she reached for the curtains, Ellen caught a glimpse of the street outside the dormitory.

In the darkness, under the moonlight,

she saw two familiar faces.

Reinhardt and Harriet de Saint-Owan.

They were walking hand in hand.

"…"

Ellen silently watched the scene from her room.

With her head bowed, as if embarrassed, Harriet walked beside Reinhardt, who held her hand gently.

Ellen, frozen in place, continued to observe the scene.

Holding hands.

How special was that gesture, really?

She had held hands countless times and embraced just as much.

She had always done so with Reinhardt. They were friends, after all.

Therefore, it should be considered as something friends do.

She should understand that it's well within the realm of their relationship.

But still.

Ellen couldn't take her eyes off their intertwined hands.

Had it already been taken away?

No.

It had always been this way, long ago.

The belief that there were parts only she could touch was a complete illusion.

"It's been a while!"

In reality, it had already happened long ago.

Had it?

Why were they?

In the end.

Holding hands was something that could be done.

She too had held his hand countless times.

Had she thought that touching Reinhardt was her exclusive privilege? That's why, seeing Harriet merely holding his hand…

Why did her heart feel so…

Fragile, as if it were breaking?

"I… I do have… sometimes, really… sometimes."

"You really think… that's petty…"

The words Harriet had once spoken echoed in Ellen's mind.

Ellen naturally realized that Harriet had always felt this way.

In places she didn't know about. With stories and memories she didn't know of. Watching from afar as they created a relationship she couldn't intrude upon.

All she could do was watch and do nothing in this situation.

That was how it felt.

Feeling betrayed, overwhelmed, angry, sorrowful, and wronged.

Had Harriet expressed this feeling with just the word "petty"?

It didn't seem like a feeling that could be expressed with just that word.

Ellen looked at the two of them returning to the dormitory.

Perhaps it was already too late.

Harriet was doing what she had to do. There was no need or reason to hate her. If she wanted to hate that sight, Ellen should have been the one to receive Harriet's hatred long ago.

Harriet was just trying her best in her own way; there was no need to hate her for that. Ellen tried to convince herself.

So, she just had to do what she had to do.

She had to show her best side tomorrow. After seeing her tomorrow, Reinhardt might change a little from what he was like up until now.

Exchanging various stories, he might change a little from what he was like up until now.

That should be enough.

Today is today, and tomorrow is tomorrow.

With her eyes tightly shut, Ellen tried her best to erase the lingering image of the two from her mind.

That night.

I swung my sword in the training hall.

Neither Cliffman nor Ellen was there. So, after a long time, I struck the practice dummy. I could have asked Saviolin Turner for guidance, but it was already late, and that lady secretly became enthusiastic when teaching, so I figured I wouldn't be able to sleep on time.

So, I swung my practice sword at the dummy.

-Crack!

"Damn it."

The practice sword broke.

I had wielded the sword to the point of oblivion. It's not like I'm that deeply immersed in swordsmanship.

What could it be?

I had lost track of time.

It was already well past my usual bedtime. If I had received lessons from Saviolin Turner, I would have finished earlier.

My whole body was drenched in sweat.

I collected the remnants of the broken practice sword and threw them into the trash, then opened the window of the training hall.

A chilly breeze brushed past my cheeks and sweat-soaked clothes.

Right now.

I must be feeling agitated.

What should I do?

No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't figure it out.

It was long past my bedtime, and I didn't think I could swing a practice sword in this state without breaking another one. I decided to wash up and go to sleep.

I considered doing something to pass the time, but without Ellen around, I wasn't in the mood to do anything by myself.

"Oh."

As I walked down the hallway, I bumped into someone. The person who faced me

tilted his head.

The one who faced me was none other than Bertus.

Shouldn't he be busy managing the magic train? What brought him to the dormitory at this hour?

"Why are you still awake at this hour?"

Bertus said what I was about to ask him.

"I was at the training hall."

“…Training even during the festival. Impressive."

Bertus smirked.

"What about you?"

"Ah… I had some work to do, and now I'm going to rest."

Had he finished the magic train management work for the festival?

His dark circles were prominent, whether it was from staying up all night or having too much work. He had no business praising me for training during the festival; wasn't he working even harder than usual?

"Ah, I heard you won the tournament. Congratulations."

"Uh… Yeah."

Bertus patted my shoulder and walked towards his room. He seemed to have struggled quite a bit these past few days, as his exhaustion was visible on his usually stoic face.

And just when it seemed he was about to enter his room, he suddenly looked back at me as if he remembered something.

"Ah… Wait a moment."

"Uh… Why?"

Cold sweat broke out all over my body.

The others had safely passed by.

But not him.

He still hasn't seen me since I was dressed as a girl.

Bertus narrowed his eyes and stared at me intently.

No way?

Could he recognize me? Honestly, we only encountered each other briefly, so it was more like a fleeting glance, right?

"Hmm…"

Bertus stared at me with a frown, then shook his head.

"No, I think I'm just tired."

Bertus gave me a spine-chilling grin and went into his room.

Back in his dormitory room, Bertus dragged his heavy, waterlogged body to wash up and lay down on his bed.

Managing the operation of the magic train during the festival.

He didn't think it was a trivial matter. The magic train was the most important means of transportation on the Royal Road, with many passengers even on normal days. Moreover, during this period, passengers flocked from all over the continent.

Therefore.

There are people who have never seen or heard of the magic train in their entire lives.

Some children cry, thinking it's a monster, while even adults panic and run away in confusion.

These are nobles.

Even in remote rural areas on the continent, there is a social hierarchy.

Deciding to travel to the capital to see the Temple Festival means they have enough money to pay the fees for the warp gate.

So, most of the time, high-ranking people from their regions come to the capital.

There are numerous people who complain about the lack of a noble-only compartment on the magic train. They argue about how they can use the same means of transportation as commoners.

Although it's laughable for these people to squabble over rank, Bertus had to handle this job well.

He had been under an enormous amount of stress trying to resolve all incidents and accidents smoothly and without issue.

So, feeling he needed to sleep properly for once, he had returned to the dormitory.

Bertus' head felt like it was about to explode.

However, upon seeing Reinhardt, something suddenly came to mind.

He hadn't had time to think about it while swamped with work, but he recalled the silver-haired girl he had encountered last time.

The moment he saw Reinhardt, the image of the silver-haired girl sprang to mind.

He couldn't forget her.

Having committed the unthinkable faux pas of spitting tea all over her face when they first met, Bertus would never forget her for the rest of his life.

'She does resemble him. She definitely does.'

He wondered if he was imagining it due to exhaustion, but upon closer thought, they did resemble each other.

Of course, he would need to see them side by side to be sure.

But it was certain that the silver-haired girl and Reinhardt looked very similar.

However, Bertus' train of thought took a peculiar turn.

First of all.

Bertus was so busy that he didn't know the details of the festival. At most, he only knew that Reinhardt had won the first-year tournament.

Therefore, he didn't know who the silver-haired girl was, nor that she had participated in the Temple cross-dressing contest.

Thus, to Bertus, the silver-haired girl was just a silver-haired girl.

Two completely different people.

But they looked alike.

They even shared a similar sharp tongue.

When he asked about her silver hair, she said it was dyed.

Moreover, Reinhardt came from the streets.

'Does Reinhardt have a sister or an older sibling?'

There are cases where siblings are separated, so it's entirely possible that Reinhardt may have blood relatives he doesn't know about.

All he had to do was ask Reinhardt.

If he had a younger or older sister.

Of course, Reinhardt would give an answer of either yes or no, but he would also be curious about why Bertus was asking such a question.

'Well, it could be a coincidence.'

People can coincidentally look alike.

If he carelessly mentioned that he met someone who might be his sister or older sibling, Reinhardt would undoubtedly be disappointed if it turned out not to be true.

'Should I investigate separately…?'

There's no need to go out of his way to tell Reinhardt about it.

If it turns out to be true, Bertus could help Reinhardt find his long-lost relative.

If not, it would merely be a matter of returning the handkerchief he hadn't been able to give back then.

Thinking that it was just such a trivial matter, Bertus gradually drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 314

Friday.

Today is the Miss Temple Contest and the finals of the Unrestricted Class Tournament.

Olivia Lanze, who must participate in both events, is sure to be extremely busy. The first-year students of the Royal Class don't seem particularly interested in the Unrestricted Class Tournament, which starts from the semi-finals, since none of their classmates are competing.

Ellen, Liana, and Cliffman all appear to be busy preparing for the contest.

However, when Ellen runs into me in the morning, she gazes at me quietly.

"Today…"

I know what she wants to say.

"Aren't you going?"

"…Yeah."

Ellen has watched all of my tournament matches. Even if she hadn't, there's no reason not to attend the Miss Temple Contest today.

I have to make Cliffman Mister Temple, even if I have to use some kind of trick, and I still don't know what to do about Miss Temple.

There's no reason for me not to go to the contest. Ellen hesitates for a moment, then looks at me with a determined expression.

"…Make sure you come."

"Alright, prepare well."

"Okay."

After the contest, I wonder if she has something to say.

That's the impression her expression gave me.

Ellen leaves those words behind and goes somewhere with Liana to prepare.

The other guys seem to be enjoying the festival on their own, but I've decided to move alone during the day.

Without anyone joining me.

I'm going to watch the Unrestricted Class Tournament finals, which are now out of my classmates' interests. Of course, there may be some who will watch, but I still plan to go alone.

I have a lot to apologize for to Olivia. She always takes care of me and does anything for me, but I always treat her poorly. Yesterday, I even openly supported Harriet.

Being good at everything doesn't mean you're strong-willed in every situation.

I don't know if there are others who will watch the finals separately, but I intend to go to the Unrestricted Class Tournament finals without joining anyone.

The matches begin from the semi-finals, but in the end, there are only three matches. So, even if I watch up to the finals, the time spent wouldn't be too long.

-Woahhhhhhh!

The cheers of the crowd were enormous.

The fact that Harriet lost didn't change anything.

However, just because the result matched my expectations doesn't mean the process was similar.

Like my tournament had various twists and turns, the Unrestricted Class Tournament had a few surprises as well.

So far, Olivia has only lost one set, and that was the set Harriet took.

As I wait for the match to start, I hear someone calling me from behind.

"Reinhardt, you came to watch the finals too?"

"Ah, Charlotte."

It's Charlotte.

Although I planned to watch alone, the seating area was assigned, so I couldn't help but run into someone if they came.

Anyway, I wonder if Charlotte has any reason to watch the finals.

The reason was right behind her.

"The teacher came too?"

"Yes."

It seems that Charlotte isn't here for herself, but because Saviolin Turner wanted to watch. Charlotte can't leave her side, and the teacher must have wanted to watch the finals.

Charlotte wasn't a fool, so she had interpreted Turner's mood and decided to go watch the finals.

"If you were going, you should have said so. Why did you come alone?"

"Ah, just because."

"Really?"

She had thought it would be better to watch it alone rather than bring someone along, but she didn't intend to move seats or anything now that they had encountered each other.

Naturally, Charlotte and Saviolin Turner sat down beside me.

Charlotte looked around and folded her arms.

"Hmm."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing…”

This area was for Royal Class VIP seats.

That meant there were other VIP seats as well.

Charlotte had just been looking at the seats reserved for distinguished guests.

"Count Bolton is here."

"Bolton?"

As I cocked my head, Saviolin Turner looked at me.

"Didn't you exchange greetings with him at the last patronage party?"

"At the patronage party?"

I had forgotten the names of the people I had greeted at the patronage party. Bolton? Who was that?

'Hmm.'

'His memory isn't great, is it?'

I could feel Saviolin Turner's gaze pass by with such thoughts, but only for a moment.

"It's Sir Eleion Bolton, the current commander of the Holy Knights."

"Ah."

That's right.

It was a familiar name. Eleion Bolton, the new commander of the Holy Knights who took office after Riverrier Lanze's dismissal.

I didn't know much about him, and I hadn't supported him, so I had completely forgotten about him.

Charlotte wore a subtle smile.

"I didn't see him yesterday, so I was wondering if he was coming. I guess he's here for the finals."

“…Maybe because he doesn't want to see Olivia win?"

"Well… I don't know what Count Bolton is thinking, but it's probably going to be an unpleasant sight."

How would the current commander of the Holy Knights, a prominent candidate for the next religious leader, feel watching a talent who abandoned her faith win the tournament without using divine power?

It was clear he wouldn't feel good. As I recalled his name, I recognized his face as well.

Different from Riverrier Lanze, he had a stern and unyielding appearance. He was not wearing knightly armor but formal attire, and around him were those who looked like his close associates, also likely to be Holy Knights, silently watching the arena.

Saviolin Turner, who had been quietly listening to our conversation, tilted her head.

"Rather than worrying about Olivia, he might be supporting someone else."

"Someone else?"

"Don't you know the other top four contestants?"

"I can't remember anyone other than Senior Olivia."

Charlotte laughed scornfully, as if she didn't bother remembering things unrelated to her.

"Among the top four, there's a student whose entry into the Holy Knights is confirmed after graduation."

"Ah… really?"

"He might be hoping that the student will defeat Olivia."

It was inevitable that Olivia had given up her faith.

So, it would make sense for the future Holy Knight member to wish for a victory against Olivia, who didn't use divine power.

Certainly, among the contestants of the Unrestricted-class tournament, there were quite a few who seemed to aspire to become Holy Knights. Most of them possessed skills that could not be ignored.

Royal-class 6th grade A-3, Jordan Windsor.

Royal-class 6th grade B-2, Lydia Schmitt.

Lydia Schmitt.

The person who was curious about what Olivia and I had been discussing.

She seemed like a good person, but I had felt something peculiar about her.

She was an incredible talent who used both Divine Power and Magic Body Strengthening.

Anyway.

Since Olivia had been held back for a year, Lydia Schmitt and Olivia had actually spent a long time together in the Temple.

Had their relationship soured when Olivia abandoned her faith?

If Lydia Schmitt were to join the Holy Knight Order, she could very well be jealous of Olivia.

They would have been compared to each other in many ways. Lydia Schmitt was

incredibly talented, but ultimately, she hadn't surpassed Olivia.

I would have seen her if she belonged to the Religious Club Grace, but my first meeting with her had been a brief conversation in front of the dormitory last time.

If someone with a perfect talent upgrade had always been above oneself, it must have been a painful experience.

While we were exchanging various stories, the announcer began to move the competition forward.

Royal-class 5th grade student, Olivia Lanze, who has only one loss in the set so far!

With the cheers of the crowd, Olivia was teleported onto the stadium.

Even though there had been a minor accident yesterday, Olivia had regained her relaxed smile.

However, what had changed was that Olivia, who had been fighting with bare fists until now, was holding a sword this time.

Did she think there was no need to take a penalty from the semi-finals on? Or did she judge that she might lose a set unexpectedly if she was as careless as yesterday?

Besides Olivia Lance, the top four contestants were two 6th grade Royal-class students and one 5th grade student from the Orbis-class.

The Royal-class students were all in their final year of the temple's grade division.

Olivia Lanze's opponent in the top four was a 5th grade Orbis-class student, Melanie Benier.

It must have been bitter that the Orbis-class disappeared just before graduation.

The Orbis-class had been a cradle of revolutionary forces, and most of the students and teachers involved had either withdrawn or resigned from teaching.

Those who remained were either not captured or had decided to stay in the temple after being captured.

The revolutionary forces.

It made my head throb every time I thought about it.

Regardless of my concerns, the first match of the top four started soon.

The process was not very important.

3:0

It was a complete victory for Olivia Lanze.

Had Harriet had a chance against Olivia because she used magic? Or was it because Olivia, wielding a sword, was even stronger?

The opponent seemed to struggle, but they were no match for Olivia.

Above all, the opponent seemed somewhat annoyed, but their expression was not that of being absorbed in defeat as if they knew the outcome would be like this.

The next match of the semi-finals.

Royal Class 6th Year A-3, Jordan Windsor.

Royal Class 6th Year B-2, Lydia Schmitt.

Naturally, those who had advanced to the semi-finals possessed unquestionable skill. I had watched the previous matches of Lydia Schmitt and Jordan Windsor.

Lydia Schmitt favored double buffs, while Jordan Windsor was exceptionally skilled, even without the ability to use divine power.

Of course, both were formidable opponents who I couldn't even hope to challenge at my current level. Even if Harriet faced them, she wouldn't have been able to secure a victory.

It wasn't just Olivia who was a monster; the other upperclassmen of the Royal Class were monsters as well.

The most talented individuals had honed their skills for six years. Although there was an exceptional monster like Olivia, they were monsters in their own right.

Talent doesn't just run away.

Frankly, even if Erich seemed like a waste of space right now, it didn't mean he'll still be one six years later. He seemed to be putting in effort lately, so there was a chance he'll awaken his Magic Body Strengthening after three years. And three years after that, he could become a monster who can compete in the Unrestricted-Class Tournament.

Olivia Lanze was originally in the same grade as the 6th-year students. Excluding the 5th-years who participated in the Demon World War, she would have spent her entire time at the Temple with them.

Thus, she was likely closer to the 6th-year students.

Facing off against fellow Royal Class peers in the finals of the Unrestricted-Class Tournament would be quite a fascinating and enjoyable experience.

If the Gate incident hadn't happened, perhaps Ellen and I would have faced each other in the finals of the Unrestricted-Class Tournament as we advanced in grade.

…But I would probably lose.

Even if I made it to the finals, imagining myself losing to Ellen…

Honestly, it didn't seem like it would feel that bad.

The second match of the semi-finals turned out to be quite thrilling, contrary to my expectations.

"Good luck, Lydia."

"You too."

Both of them smiled and exchanged greetings, showing that their relationship wasn't that bad. Despite being in different classes, they seemed to be on friendly terms, perhaps due to the long time they spent together.

However, that was only for a moment.

Their expressions hardened.

The friendly atmosphere vanished as if it never existed, and their battle of exploration began.

Melanie Benier, the 5th-year from Orvis Class who had just been defeated by Olivia in a 3-0 shutout, was undoubtedly much more skilled than me.

And now, these two were 6th-years from the temple.

This would be the last time they faced each other in a setting like this tournament.

Regardless of their usual relationship, this special kind of battlefield would be the last time they tested each other's strength.

So, they had no choice but to be serious.

-Uuung!

Blue magical power wrapped around Jordan Windsor's body. It didn't have the explosive, blazing sensation like Ellen's.

It was the complete opposite.

It focused on control and stability.

The compressed and refined power had no unnecessary magical operation; it was like a finely sharpened blade.

It wasn't that the scale was weak.

The technique involved using an extremely efficient Magic Body Strengthening, applying just the right amount of force where it was needed. Perhaps the method Ellen and I should learn from the most is the one similar to Jordan Windsor's Magic Body Strengthening.

Lydia Schmidt's case was a little different.

She suddenly thrust her sword into the ground of the arena.

-Thud!

The metal sword pierced the stone floor, and from the ground, white thread-like lines began to crawl up and wrap around the sword.

The white light that enveloped the sword soon began to coil around Lydia herself.

But that wasn't all.

Not only was Lydia's body surrounded by the white light, but blue magical power also flowed simultaneously.

Strengthening the body with divine power and supporting it with Magic Body Strengthening.

A method of adding strength to strength.

Though I, capable of Self-Suggestion, shouldn't be the one to say this, that double enhancement seems unfair. Saviolin Turner quietly speaks as he watches the spectacle.

"The divine power of the War God Ares…"

Having already seen Lydia Schmidt's match, she knew she used Ares' divine power.

"There is nothing important about Ares' divine power…"

"Yes."

It's something I'm also aware of.

The War God Ares.

"Divine power that focuses all its energy on attack, unable to use the power of healing…"

While the power of divine protection isn't limited to healing, most divine powers can use healing to some extent.

However, the priests of the War God Ares cannot use the power of healing.

A power specialized only in destruction and breaking.

A power focused on slaughter and massacre.

That is the divine power of the War God.

Having absorbed enough divine power from the earth, Lydia Schmidt pulls out her sword, now shrouded in white light, and stares at her opponent with blue and white light wrapped around her body.

-Here we go.

-Yes.

They are not just superhuman, but among the superhumans, they are some of the most skilled.

The two monsters, who could be called the essence of the Royal Class, collide.

-Bang!

Although it was just the clashing of swords, I could see the shockwave distorting the air with my own eyes.

As the level of confrontation was high, it was clear that the weapons provided were powerful artifact-grade weapons that could withstand any ordinary battle.

Therefore, the real battle of the superhumans had begun.

In the second match of the quarterfinals, Lydia Schmidtt from Class B was victorious. The set score was 3:1.

Jordan Windsor excelled in Magic Body Strengthening, but Lydia Schmidtt was able to use Ares' divine power.

That was the biggest difference.

The divine power focused on destruction was so intense that it sent shivers down my spine. Jordan Windsor was defeated by Lydia Schmidtt, who was aided by divine power.

It's not unusual for Class B to surpass Class A when it comes to upperclassmen.

Still, seeing it with my own eyes was a different experience.

I could see Jordan Windsor grinding his teeth in defeat.

Regardless of their usual relationship, ultimately, the decisive difference that led to defeat stemmed from their training throughout their time at the temple.

Accepting defeat is difficult for anyone.

I didn't particularly empathize with either of them. Olivia was the only one I could have felt that way about today.

Of course, unlike me, the audience didn't have anyone to relate to, so they seemed quite satisfied with the spectacle provided.

But is this really a situation where Olivia can win?

Olivia can't use divine power, while Lydia Schmitt can use her full strength.

What exactly is the relationship between Lydia Schmitt and Olivia?

If Lydia Schmitt had been jealous of Olivia throughout their time in the temple, she would want to defeat her with everything she's got.

After a brief pause, the finals were about to begin.

In the end, it was a match between classmates.

Olivia Lanze, A-1.

And Lydia Schmitt, B-3.

The final match was a bit different from what I had expected.

Olivia's usually relaxed smile was gone, her expression stiffened, while Lydia Schmitt was smiling.

"Olivia."

“…Yes."

The atmosphere between the two was tense.

Before the match, Lydia Schmitt's gaze and smile seemed different when talking to Jordan Windsor.

Lydia Schmitt.

There was something akin to madness in her eyes.

"Your divine power feels stronger than before."

"…”

"Return to the embrace of the gods, Olivia. You were born for it. You were made to live nowhere else but in the embrace of the gods."

"Lydia, I…”

"Come back, Olivia."

It wasn't jealousy or feelings of inferiority that I had anticipated.

Lydia Schmit felt something completely different for Olivia.

"I told you. I've given it all up. I've been saying it over and over again…”

"No, Olivia. Your divine power, your talent, your character—all of it. You are the only person truly capable of uniting the Five Great Holy Faiths. You are the only one who can put an end to this long history of faith and lead us into the next era."

Lydia Schmitt smiled as she spoke to Olivia.

Olivia wielded the divine power of Owan, while Lydia Schmit wielded that of Ares'.

Even though they were both part of the Five Great Holy Faiths, their beliefs were different.

Despite this, Lydia Schmitt was trying to bring Olivia back to their faith. Olivia looked troubled.

"Come back, Olivia."

"I'm sorry, Lydia. I have no intention of going back."

It was then that I realized I didn't know the specifics of Olivia's time in the temple.

Just as Riverrier Lanze didn't want to lose Olivia's talent,

Many people must have felt sorry for her, including classmates who had been touched by Olivia.

After giving up her faith, she must have continued to hear such things. Not only from religious figures, but also from the numerous classmates she had been close to up until then.

When they had been maintaining their faith, they had gotten along well. But as soon as Olivia gave up her faith, they relentlessly tried to persuade her to change her mind like this.

Olivia must have been exhausted by it all.

In the end, contrary to my expectations, Lydia Schmitt didn't feel jealousy towards Olivia Lanze but was, in fact, one of her fervent admirers.

"What are they talking about?"

As Saviolin Turner and I were focused on the two far away, Charlotte asked Saviolin Turner.

“…She's trying to convince Olivia to regain her faith."

"Ah…”

Charlotte sighed.

"It must be tiring for that senior as well."

"…"

A fatigue close to despair was evident in Olivia.

She must have known that she would face such situations for the rest of her life.

Olivia had endured more than I had thought.

"There's only one answer, Lydia. I have no intention of returning to the gods' embrace."

Upon hearing Olivia's words, Lydia closed her eyes for a moment.

"I see… Then prepare yourself."

“…Prepare?"

"Yes. Prepare."

Lydia Schmitt once again drove her sword into the ground of the arena.

"Prepare to endure the sadness."

"Clang!"

Lydia Schmitt didn't seem like a malicious person. She had even given me a gentle smile when she briefly spoke to me. I must have mistakenly felt uneasy around her.

However, when talking to Olivia, Lydia Schmitt was a completely different person.

The laughter had vanished from her face, and a different feeling could be read in her expression compared to the semi-finals.

Madness and obsession.

"Everything that happens from now on is the will of the gods, meant to guide you, who have lost your way, back to the right path."

"Whooosh!"

Divine power erupted from the ground of the arena, enveloping Lydia Schmitt.

CHAPTER 315

Divine Power and Magic Body Strengthening

What will happen now? Even if Lydia Schmitt defeats Olivia, there's no reason for Olivia to regain her faith, thinking that she's nothing without divine power.

Krrrrrr!

As Olivia activated her Magic Body Strengthening, the finals of the Unrestricted Tournament begin.

"I have a feeling… something's off."

"Indeed."

Saviolin Turner and I couldn't help but feel a sense of foreboding after overhearing their conversation.

Lydia Schmitt is up to something.

Kwakang!

Contrary to our ominous premonition, it was difficult to discern who had the upper hand between the two.

One thing was clear; Lydia Schmitt was an incredibly skilled fighter.

However, Olivia Lanze, who was fighting her solely with enhanced magical power, was not falling behind. This meant that if Olivia were to use her divine power as well, she would have an overwhelming advantage.

No matter how much Ares' power was focused on offense, there was bound to be a strengthening power in Owan's power. It would be easy for Olivia to secure victory against Lydia Schmitt if she were to use that as well.

What on earth is Lydia Schmitt trying to do? Is she trying to force Olivia, who senses

her defeat, to use her divine power?

Olivia said that if such a thing were to happen, she would be subjected to a religious trial.

That's why she didn't use her divine power even when facing a set loss against Harriet.

"By any chance… what would happen if Olivia, who has officially renounced her faith, were to use her divine power?"

Although I had some knowledge about it, I wasn't completely certain, so I asked.

“…She won't end up in a good situation."

Charlotte replied in a pessimistic tone.

“…Those who use unauthorized divine power are treated as witches."

Saviolin Turner supplemented.

Priests or Holy Knights.

Regardless of receiving blessings or anything, there's a kind of certification for divine power. Even though students of this sort, who are like apprentices, are considered exceptions.

It must be to monopolize divine power.

Olivia wasn't someone secretly healing people in some remote countryside village; she was a person who had been called the Saint of Eredian.

When faith is renounced, divine power should disappear since it originates from belief in the divine.

However, not only did Olivia's divine power not vanish, but it became even stronger.

It's just that she mustn't use it. Divine power not used within the divine's embrace would be considered heresy.

"If such a thing were to happen, Olivia wouldn't be treated as a witch. However, she would be subjected to a religious trial."

If Olivia were to use her divine power, she would be using unauthorized divine power in a public place. That would create ample opportunity to entangle her with heresy interrogation or religious trials as an excuse.

Lydia Schmitt must be trying to force Olivia to use her divine power.

But how?

Olivia didn't use her divine power even at the moment she was defeated by Harriet.

In the tournament, Olivia considers it a power she doesn't possess and fights accordingly.

If she loses, she loses. There's no need to forcibly use divine power.

-Boom! Crash!

With the powerful strike from Lydia Schmitt, a heavy shock reverberated through the arena, and Olivia managed to block it with a single sword.

Not only did Olivia withstand the devastating divine power with her Magic Body Strengthening alone, she even managed to counterattack.

I wasn't sure about anything else, but was this truly a battle between humans?

That's how it felt.

"Amazing. Both of them."

The world's strongest monster praised them from beside me.

It was that intense of a fight.

Lydia Schmitt employed everything she could in the battle.

Olivia Lanze only used Magic Body Strengthening.

If it weren't for Olivia, wouldn't Lydia Schmitt be in Olivia's place?

That's how impressive Lydia's skills were. However, she didn't envy Olivia; instead, she wanted to return Olivia to where she rightfully belonged.

Not jealousy, but obsession.

In the end, both were exhausting.

-Rumble!

A white light emitted from Lydia's sword, condensed with divine power, and stabbed into the ground.

-Boom!

It was so intense, it made me wonder if that was really divine power. The destructive divine power exhibited a force even greater than magic.

The arena, reinforced after Harriet's battle, was visibly being torn apart in real time.

To think she was a Holy Knight.

In fact, the term berserker seemed to fit better.

However, Olivia, who faced her, was just as incredible.

She either parried or dodged the dangerous, powerful attacks, and struck back with precise timing, preventing Lydia from regaining momentum.

Lydia took the lead in overall output.

However, Olivia pressed on Lydia with more precise and faster predictive attacks and counters.

Therefore, the outcome of the match could be predicted to some extent.

Lydia was doing well, but Olivia would win.

She wasn't underestimating her opponent like in the battle with Harriet.

Olivia was doing her best without using divine power and without letting her guard down.

Lydia Schmitt's hidden trump card.

If she planned to force Olivia to use divine power, what could that strategy be?

Olivia attacked Lydia sharply and precisely.

-Boom! Crash! Bang!

As if to end it in one fell swoop, Olivia's relentless attacks gave Lydia no chance to catch her breath.

One strike after another.

Olivia, who steadily attacked both the divine power and Magic Body Strengthening defenses of the opponent, finally created an opening.

This was the end.

Sensing her victory, Olivia thrust her sword toward Lydia Schmitt's chest.

At the moment when it seemed Olivia would take the first set.

-Rumble!

I could clearly see the explosive red energy surging from Lydia Schmitt's body.

"That is…!"

Saviolin Turner stared wide-eyed at the scene before him, and Olivia stumbled back in shock.

"Lydia! What are you doing?"

"Olivia… You have to win, right? You need the money. That's why you joined the tournament, isn't it? To help the children?"

Lydia, enveloped in a sinister red aura, revealed a chilling smile.

"Defeat me with all your might. Give it everything you've got."

It was clear that Lydia Schmitt, shrouded in an ominous red light, was not in an ordinary state. Saviolin Turner mumbled as if he knew what the red aura was about.

"Berserk… Why? How can a mere student possess such power…?"

"What is that?"

"It's a power rarely used by the high priests of Ares."

Berserk.

Though they didn't know the details, the word itself gave them a sense of what it meant. Olivia cried out, her face turning pale.

"Lydia! Stop it right now!"

"That power… It consumes one's life."

It was an extreme method used by the knights of Ares when they burned their own lives to draw out their strength.

The knights of Ares were not just similar to berserkers; they were berserkers themselves.

Lydia Schmitt was now using that power in the tournament finals.

Lydia knew the reason Olivia had to win. She knew that Olivia had joined not for herself, but because she needed the prize money.

That's why Lydia performed such a reckless act, burning her own life to increase her power, so that Olivia couldn't defeat her without giving it her all.

Was Lydia going to such lengths just to make Olivia use her divine power?

Bang! Crash! Clang!

Lydia Schmitt, enveloped in the red aura, was relentlessly pushing Olivia back.

Charlotte looked at Saviolin Turner with a worried expression.

"Shouldn't we stop this?"

"Yes, but Berserk is an extremely rare ability among the powers used by the priests of Ares. Even within the Ares Church, only a few know how to use it. Olivia seems to know, but whether the organizers understand the situation right now, I'm not sure…"

To the untrained eye, it appeared as if Lydia Schmitt, who had been on the verge of defeat, suddenly unleashed her power. They wouldn't know that the red aura was consuming her life.

The atmosphere around Holy Knight Commander Eleion Bolton had turned tense.

Eleion Bolton watched the arena with a serious expression, while the knights accompanying him exchanged confused looks.

Even some of the high-ranking knights with the Holy Knight Commander did not know what Lydia Schmitt was doing.

With gritted teeth, Olivia withstood the powerful onslaught of Lydia Schmitt's attacks.

The match needed to be stopped immediately.

But if the organizers didn't understand the situation, the match would continue as it was.

Olivia was being pushed back by Lydia Schmitt, who was drawing out her utmost power. It would be best to subdue her in one go, but that would require the use of divine power.

That was not an option to consider.

She could endure without using divine power, but in that case, Lydia Schmitt would die on the spot once all her life force was drained.

Therefore, there was only one way to stop Lydia Schmitt, who was attacking by burning her life force.

Halting the match.

Or.

Olivia giving up the contest.

Those were the only two options.

"Lady Turner, stop the match immediately. I'll take full responsibility."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Charlotte spoke with a serious expression, and the moment Saviolin Turner nodded his head.

“I forfeit…”

Olivia, with a lost expression, declared her forfeit.

Olivia sat in the waiting room for the competitors, covering her face with both hands, trembling.

She had forfeited.

'I want to be like my sister when I grow up!'

'Heh, your dream is too small? You should aim to be much greater than your sister.'

'But my sister is the prettiest, kindest, and most amazing person I know.'

'Hey, don't flatter me too much.'

She forfeited.

'Thank you, Olivia.'

'No problem. It's my duty.'

'But now, with the circumstances… I hope you don't push yourself too hard.'

'Madam Principal, I'm still fine. I think I can earn a lot of prize money at the Temple Festival this time.'

'Prize money?'

'Yes, the tournament and other competitions… Um, there's that stuff anyway!'

She had forfeited.

She had no choice.

There is no second-place prize in the Temple Tournament.

Most of the audience was bewildered.

The highly anticipated final had ended all too anticlimactically.

Very few knew the details. A discussion was needed on whether Lydia Schmitt's actions warranted disqualification.

So for now, the tournament had to be concluded, even if it felt lukewarm.

Olivia couldn't even bear to watch the award ceremony.

It wasn't just about the prize money.

It was painful to not win, but more than that, Olivia felt like her head was about to explode.

She felt like she was going insane.

She couldn't understand why she was doing this to herself.

How long had she been sitting there in a daze?

"Olivia."

Lydia Schmitt was walking towards Olivia.

-Thud!

She threw away the dazzling trophy, the symbol of winning the Unrestricted Tournament. As if she had no interest in it whatsoever.

Lydia approached Olivia.

"Why did you forfeit?"

"…"

"You needed the money, didn't you?"

There was not a trace of happiness in Lydia Schmitt's expression from winning.

All she wanted in return for choosing to burn her own life was for Olivia to use her divine power in public.

Because of that, she was willing to risk her life to be brought to a religious trial and forcibly made to walk the path of a priestess again. As if it was only natural to risk her life.

If she had used her divine power, Olivia could have subdued Lydia Schmitt, who had activated her berserk mode.

But Olivia did not do so.

If she had continued to fight, Lydia Schmitt would have met her death.

Olivia was forced to make a choice.

She had to choose between a life of poverty, unable to feed the starving children, or reluctantly living as a religious person. She chose one of those paths.

She had to make a choice, and Olivia made her choice.

"This isn't the Olivia I know."

Lydia didn't feel the slightest bit of joy in her victory. Instead, she was angry, staring down at Olivia.

"The Olivia I know would have subdued me in an instant, taken the prize money, and helped people. She should have done that, without a doubt."

In Lydia Schmitt's mind, Olivia wasn't someone who would forfeit in such a situation. She had participated in the competition to help people with the prize money, so she should have used her divine power without thinking about herself.

Everyone expected her to act that way.

And Lydia Schmitt was angry that she hadn't.

Olivia, her face pale, was trembling.

"Yeah, I'm selfish. I'm going to live selfishly from now on. That's how I'm going to live. This is me. This is who I am now… So, leave me alone."

"No, Olivia. No. It shouldn't be like this. You should have used your divine power just now."

Lydia Schmitt shook her head adamantly.

Then, she knelt down in front of Olivia, looking up at the terrified girl.

Her dark, abyss-like eyes stared at Olivia.

"Olivia, you can be a good person again. Look at me, I put my life on the line, not caring about myself, just to help you. I wasn't always like this. I admired how you always helped people, Olivia, so I tried to become someone like that too. That's why I acted this way. So now, let me help you, Olivia. If this continues, you'll only suffer more. More hardships will come. More cruel things will happen. No, this situation, where you're drifting away from the divine, is already unbearably cruel for you. It's not for nothing that I did this. This was the only way to avoid harming anyone."

Olivia couldn't even properly hear Lydia Schmitt's rapid speech.

She didn't want to listen in the first place.

Lydia Schmitt thought the person she admired was falling apart.

That's why she believed it was time for her to help Olivia.

"I never asked you to do that… Please…"

"No. No, Olivia. I'll give you my prize money. I don't want you to become a bad person. You can help the children. But promise me one thing. Promise that you'll return to the divine's embrace. It's not too late. It's not too late."

No words would reach the ears of one who would not listen. Olivia could no longer bear to meet the eyes of Lydia Schmitt, so she tightly shut her own.

In the end, Olivia burst into tears.

"Please, don't do this to me… Please… Just leave me alone… I beg you. Why me? Why does it have to be me… Please… Just leave me be… I don't think I'm wrong. I don't think I'm doing something wrong…"

"No!"

Lydia shouted, as if she couldn't let that particular statement slide.

"Olivia! You mustn't say such things! You were chosen by the gods! A perfect person like you, who was born with the blessings of all five great deities, cannot deny the gods! Yes, yes, that's right. You're going through a period of wandering. Oh, the gods are giving you this trial to make you even more perfect. Oh yes, this is all part of the gods' will to lead you to greater glory. So, let's think about it slowly. Starting from going back to the temple. No, from talking about their grace with others, starting slowly…"

"Damn, you talk a lot."

At the sudden voice from the hallway, both Lydia and the crying Olivia turned their heads.

"Why do you keep trying to convert someone who's not interested? Even street preachers don't cling like this."

The one approaching with rough strides was none other than Reinhardt. Reinhardt strode over and forcibly pulled the weeping Olivia to her feet by her hand.

"If they spout nonsense, why don't you just slap them instead of listening to such drivel?"

"…"

"This isn't your business, Reinhardt."

Lydia Schmitt said to Reinhardt with a stern expression.

"What nonsense are you talking about?"

Reinhardt pulled the trembling Olivia behind him, as if to hide her.

"It was never your place to meddle between us in the first place."

“…What?"

"You should mind your own business."

Reinhardt grabbed Olivia's hand and began to drag her away.

"Hey, where are you going! You can't take Olivia! You mustn't do this!"

At Lydia's cry, Reinhardt shot her an icy glare.

"Leave it be. Stop babbling nonsense."

"…"

Olivia, with her head hanging low, was led away by Reinhardt's hand. Lydia watched with clenched teeth as Olivia was taken away, powerless to resist.

Reinhardt.

That name, like a thorn in her throat.

Olivia, who was once delicate and gentle, had become unbending in her stubbornness.

But she was infinitely generous to that one person alone.

The pure saintess, who should maintain her purity, behaved as if she loved him.

No, it was only since becoming close with that Reinhardt that Olivia had changed like this.

He was the root cause of it all.

If only he would disappear, the problem would be solved.

Everyone was focusing on the wrong thing.

"He shouldn't be touched," they say.

And yet, they are trying to sacrifice another pitiful child.

'Parasite, trash. A demon-like creature.'

In Lydia Schmitt's eyes, Reinhardt was nothing more than the person responsible for leading the once-righteous Olivia astray.

He must be gone.

Only without him can Olivia return to her original self.

Return to the proper path.

Lydia, clenching her teeth, stared quietly at the hallway where Olivia had disappeared.

'That's right… It's you… '

She could do anything for Olivia.

'It would be better if you died. If you die instead of Adriana, Olivia will be alright… All we need is for you to be gone… Why should a child embraced by the gods be sacrificed because of someone like you… No, it can't be. It should be you. A single unbeliever like you is all it takes to solve the problem.'

Lydia Schmitt's eyes were wide with rage.

CHAPTER 316

The leader of the Holy Knights, Eleion Bolton, left the stadium with his followers.

"So, they said they could make her use her divine power, but that's all they had in mind?"

“…I think they expected Olivia not to forfeit."

A Holy Knight in training said briefly.

Lydia Schmitt.

Although she was not quite at Olivia's level, she was a highly anticipated and powerful aspiring Holy Knight. She was more than ready for real combat.

Eleion didn't really believe her words.

He was just curious about what she had said, that there was a way for Olivia to regain her faith.

All he saw was Olivia's determination to either witness her friend die in front of her or to forfeit instead of using her divine power.

Why did she think that method would work?

No, rather than thinking that method would work, it seemed she had no choice but to try it.

In any case, Lydia Schmitt turned out to be more extreme than Eleion Bolton had thought.

Regardless of her disposition, Eleion knew that extremists were dangerous.

In Lydia Schmitt's eyes, he saw a mad obsession with Olivia.

"Lydia Schmitt doesn't seem like she'll give up easily…”

“…I think so too."

Since Lydia Schmitt's plan didn't work out, it was clear that she would cause more trouble. A follower whispered cautiously into the Holy Knight leader's ear.

"What do you think of the possibility that Lydia Schmitt is related to the Nameless Monastic Order?"

"Extremists make easy prey, but I doubt they would want someone that extreme…”

The two exchanged an unknown conversation as they moved away from the stadium.

If Olivia had used her divine power, as the Holy Knight leader, Eleion would have had his duties. However, that didn't happen.

Thus, the Holy Knights had no more business at the temple.

“…I know it's not okay, but how are you feeling?"

“…No, thank you."

She wanted to find a quiet place, but given the situation, there were none. So, they ended up in a café with relatively few people, and I sat across from Olivia.

Her mental state seemed severely shaken.

Charlotte and Saviolin Turner knew that I was going to check on Olivia, so they asked me to talk to her.

If she had waited just a little longer, Charlotte would have stopped the fight, and she would only have had to endure for a little while.

But Olivia couldn't have known that. If she continued fighting, the exhausted Lydia Schmitt would have died, and using divine power would have led to a religious trial.

So, Olivia had no choice but to forfeit.

Lydia Schmitt's expression was also quite a sight.

She seemed to have never imagined that Olivia would forfeit, and her face was drained of color.

She must have believed that Olivia would use her divine power and subdue her.

In the end, the prize went to Lydia Schmitt. It seemed that she didn't value the victory at all, though.

Olivia sat with a gloomy expression, not even touching the tea in front of her, head hung low.

"Does this happen often?"

“…Yeah."

"Not just with that person… but others too?"

"It varies, but…”

It seemed sad to Olivia that I had learned about the numerous problems she faced since leaving her faith.

The always cheerful Olivia, who would bicker with me or Ellen, seemed a bit crazy but always appeared lively.

Olivia didn't get along well with her friends.

The constant visits and annoying intrusions weren't just because she wanted to see me.

She was running away from people like them.

While others subtly persisted in encouraging her to regain her faith, Lydia Schmitt's case seemed particularly severe.

It bordered on madness.

Olivia must have never imagined that she would experience something like this, hence the shock.

What should I say to comfort her?

What would be helpful for Olivia right now?

I've never had faith, nor have I experienced the problems that arise from abandoning it, so I couldn't understand how Olivia must have felt.

She was someone who had the expectations of the whole world.

Yet she abandoned it by choice, and people believed it was a mistake.

Could it be a situation where she doesn't think she's living a wrong life, but everyone around her says she is?

It felt like I was seeing the true face of Olivia, who always smiled brightly and kindly.

Her head was bowed, so I couldn't see her expression.

However, she had been tormented by those around her. Just because Olivia could get angry and argue with Ellen didn't mean she could do the same with others. Some words and actions might be possible for one person but impossible for another.

So, Olivia awkwardly and painfully smiled as she fended off and rejected the persuasions of those around her, slowly wearing her down.

"I don't know…"

"…"

"Why do they do this to me? I really don't understand."

She had lived with too many expectations and had escaped from her godfather, who held the greatest of those expectations, but the pressure still came from those around her.

"I don't think I'm such an extraordinary person…"

She seemed unable to accept why people were so fixated on her.

Thinking about it rationally, there had to be a reason for the fixation, even if it wasn't

as extreme as Lydia Schmitt.

Considering everything, including what was hidden, Olivia was also the owner of Tiamata, even if it was a joint property.

If that became known, her life would become even more difficult, not easier.

In the end, Olivia entered the tournament for the prize money, but she couldn't win because of Lydia Schmitt.

"In fact, I wonder if anything was different back then."

With her head bowed, Olivia laughed weakly.

There was an image of me that people wanted. Nobody… not a single one of them cared to know who I truly was or what I thought. If I didn't meet their expectations or desires, they would be disappointed in me. "Is that really how the daughter of the Captain of the Holy Knights should act? Shouldn't you be doing this instead?" I was just a doll, existing solely to fulfill the expectations of others.

Such was the life of Olivia.

A life where there were too many demands, prohibitions, and expectations.

Even if she tried to act freely for just a moment, it would be considered indulgence and a descent into corruption.

"Now, I want to understand what my life really is. What it means to live, what I truly desire. To have a life where I can be curious about these things and want them. But people still want something from me. They think I've fallen into corruption and need to be led back onto the right path. They believe that since I've been helping others up until now, it's time for me to receive help when I'm going down the wrong path. I don't think that way, though. I don't believe I'm in the wrong. People try to give me help I don't want, and they don't even realize that it's not help at all."

For those who believe living in the embrace of the divine is the absolute good, their worldview is inherently different. That's why some conversations with them just don't connect.

"This is definitely right. So, this will ultimately be good for you. That's why

everything I say must fundamentally be good."

How can a conversation work with someone who starts it by asserting their absolute correctness and your errors like that? The only ones who can communicate with them are those who share the same worldview.

Olivia managed to break free from that, but people still try to force her back, believing that she'll be happy once she returns.

Lydia Schmitt is an extreme example of this.

It's not that Olivia is simply upset about missing out on the championship prize, or that today's events were so shocking that she's in this state.

She's struggling so much because she knows this isn't the end.

She's even more distressed because she doesn't know what will happen in the future.

I want to do something to help.

But I can't just expel all of Olivia's classmates, nor can I threaten each one of them by saying I'll bash their heads in if they continue to bother her.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes."

I was usually a bit grouchy, but I softened my attitude this time.

I thought being stiff now would only hurt her more.

Olivia looked at me with difficulty, her head raised.

Her eyes were red and swollen.

It seemed like she would burst into tears at any moment.

"I know it's wrong to ask this at a time like this, but…"

"What is it? Just say it."

"Can I have a hug?"

"…"

Her expression was on the verge of breaking into tears.

The expression on her face was that of someone who believed they had no one on their side, hoping for even just one person to be there for them.

It wasn't due to any other emotion.

It seemed she purely wanted to be comforted.

"No, it's nothing. I'm sorry. Really. I'm terrible…"

As I hesitated, Olivia tried to force a smile with trembling lips.

"It's okay."

In the end, I moved to sit beside Olivia and cautiously embraced her shoulder.

Olivia buried her face in my shoulder.

Her shoulder quivered. Little by little, slowly, as if taking her first breath since birth.

Olivia cried, very softly.

"Thank you… Reinhardt."

I felt foolish for wondering what words to use to comfort her.

I realized anew that comfort isn't something that can only be given through words.

After crying for a while, Olivia fled the café as if running away.

"…I'm so embarrassed."

She seemed embarrassed for having sobbed so much in front of everyone.

"I think you should be embarrassed enough with your eyes all swollen like that."

"R-really?!"

Olivia's face turned pale at my words, and she frantically touched her face. Not that it would make much of a difference without a mirror.

"What should I do?! I have to go to the Miss Temple contest today, and what if my eyes are swollen?!"

"It's not that bad. It's hardly noticeable, so don't worry."

"But even the slightest difference can change the outcome! I failed to win the tournament, so I really have to win Miss Temple! What should I do, Reinhardt?! If I can't win, then really…"

Olivia's face threatened to crumble into tears again, but she seemed to hold back, worried that crying more would make her eyes swell further.

She seemed to be feeling a bit better. It felt like she was returning to her usual self.

In the end, what's past is past.

The tournament was over, and Olivia had no choice but to aim for Miss Temple.

Now, it was impossible to know who should wish for Olivia to become Miss Temple. She seemed so anxious about her swollen eyes, touching her face and murmuring in a despairing voice.

"Sigh… I don't even have a dress, let alone going out like this…"

"Why don't you have a dress? You have that one from the last fundraising event."

At my words, Olivia smiled awkwardly.

"Well… I actually sold that one…"

I didn't need to ask why she had sold it. Olivia seemed to think I'd be upset, and she broke into a cold sweat.

She'd been selling off her own assets to help others. It was difficult to know what to say to that.

"Can't… you just borrow one?"

“…Borrowing one still costs quite a bit."

It seemed she would have to go in her school uniform. Perhaps she would look unprepared, relying only on her looks, which would make her seem unlucky.

I imagined Olivia standing alone among the lavishly dressed people, wearing her school uniform without even proper makeup.

I couldn't be sure what the picture actually looked like, but somehow, it seemed quite miserable.

Even if she had won the Unrestricted tournament, she had forfeited in the finals.

A dress.

A dress?

"…”

“…Are you mad?"

“…No, it's not that."

A dress.

No, that can't be.

But our body shapes seem similar. I'm taller, but the size had been reduced at the time.

I didn't want to waste it, so I gave it to Elleris to sell…

It probably hasn't been sold yet…

But still, there might be someone who clearly remembers it.

Wouldn't there be a similar design anyway?

This is really dangerous…

Isn't it better to just give her money to buy a new dress?

But honestly, it's not just a small sum, and there isn't much time left. Instead of going to a boutique and looking for a suitable size and design, isn't it better to just wear that?

I know there's no need to go this far.

Olivia looked so helpless now.

I felt so sorry for her that I wanted to do something.

“…Go to the dormitory and wait a bit."

"Huh?"

"Just go and wait if I tell you to."

"Ah, okay…”

If she asks where I got the dress, I have no answer.

Well, what if it gets exposed!

I'll just lose a bit of face!

I owe her a lot this time, honestly!

What can she do if she knows? Will she kill me?

Without knowing anything, I left the temple, leaving Olivia, who was confused by my words.

"That person dropped out of the tournament finals."

“…Dropped out?"

"Yeah, I don't know why, but she forfeited?"

As Ellen was preparing for the Miss Temple contest, she cocked her head at what Liana said.

Ellen had thought that Olivia would somehow win, but she was taken aback by the unexpected news.

Although the details were not known, the audience seemed quite angry that the tournament finals ended in an unacceptable way.

Forfeiting.

Someone who seemed certain to win forfeited.

Although she could guess that there must be a reason for it, Ellen was curious about what that reason might be.

Reinhardt might have gone to watch the finals, would he know the reason?

"Ah, there she is. That person."

Liana pointed out the window, and Ellen could see Olivia outside on the first floor.

Olivia was alone.

Somehow, Ellen discovered herself feeling relieved at that fact.

At first glance, Olivia's expression didn't look good. Although she couldn't tell why Olivia had forfeited, her eyes were red and swollen.

'Is it bad luck…?'

She had cried.

And then, she returned alone.

Ellen had thought that Reinhardt might be with her, but that wasn't the case.

"Look straight here."

"Ah… Alright."

Liana turned Ellen's head and began to touch various things.

Although she couldn't know what had happened in the tournament, that person would soon be participating in the Miss Temple contest.

She wasn't aiming for the Miss Temple title either.

Ellen made up her mind firmly.

She intended to show her best side today. She had practiced smiling in front of the mirror quite a bit. It didn't go well, but she was persistently trying.

She planned to stand before Reinhardt with a different appearance than before.

When the contest was over, regardless of the outcome, they would spend some time together, even if only for a little while. They had been too busy during the festival to spend time together. Reinhardt would make time for her today.

Ellen couldn't know what expression Reinhardt would have, nor what expression she should make herself.

For today, Ellen decided to forget about everything else and think only about her own feelings.

Harriet, Olivia, and anyone else.

For today, she decided not to think of anyone other than Reinhardt.

CHAPTER 317

The Miss & Mister Temple Contest was set to start at 7 PM. The current time was 4 PM.

There wasn't much time left. The size might not fit perfectly, but I thought it should be close enough judging by the eye. The one I wore wasn't something that the size mattered that much anyway.

I was worried that Eleris might have sold it by now. But it had only been two days, so it shouldn't have been resold yet.

Since the contestants had to gather beforehand, Olivia would actually have to arrive at the contest venue a bit earlier. So I needed to give her the dress before that.

If someone pointed out that the dress was the one worn by the winner of the cross-dressing contest…

…I wasn't sure about that.

I don't know! It'll work out somehow!

It might be a bit embarrassing!

No one ever died of embarrassment!

With no time to waste, I hurried to the Aligar Shopping Street, where Eleris's store was located.

“…This is driving me crazy."

The fastest means of transportation in the empire was the magical train.

During the Temple Festival, the empire was crowded with an excessive number of people.

Thus, the magical train station was packed with people waiting to board. Even after

sending three full trains, I still couldn't get on.

I shouldn't be late.

Nevertheless, the magical train was bound to be faster than walking or running, so I anxiously waited for the train and boarded it.

I wasn't sure why I had to ride a hellish train after coming to this world, but I finally managed to arrive at the Aligar Shopping Street.

Now all I had to do was go to Eleris's basement room, get the dress, and leave.

However.

I didn't have eyes in the back of my head.

But now I had developed something like an intuition that played a similar role.

A sense of unease.

There was a feeling of unease following me from behind. An unpleasant sensation, sticky and sinister, as if something was clinging to my back.

I instinctively knew.

I was being followed.

“…If you're going to tail me, shouldn't you at least hide yourself?"

In her school uniform and not even trying to hide, Lydia Schmitt was watching me intently in the middle of the bustling Aligar Shopping Street.

"…”

I thought she was a tasteless person, but to follow me so openly. Lydia Schmitt approached me with a subtle smile on her lips.

"Reinhardt, I have a favor to ask."

"What favor?"

"Stay away from Olivia. Please."

Lydia Schmitt's eyes were so chilling that they made my skin crawl just by looking at them.

Had Olivia been watching this lunatic with such eyes, pleading without hesitation all this time?

Even experiencing it just a little was horrifying, let alone having it happen around her continuously.

It was a wonder that Olivia had managed to keep her sanity intact.

"It's all your fault. Olivia's like this, she's corrupted, she's drifted away from the embrace of the gods, all because of you. All we need is for you to be gone. If you just stay away, Olivia can return to her former self. Don't you think so?"

“…Senior, I think you're mistaken. Olivia had already decided to abandon her faith before she met me. It has nothing to do with me."

The order was mixed up. Olivia was already in that state before she met me. So it's absurd to say it's because of me.

Lydia Schmitt stared at me with eyes as if she were entranced by something.

"No, it's because of you. Olivia could have been saved. She could have definitely changed her mind back then. Everything went wrong after she met you."

There's no way my words can get through to her since she's already drawn her conclusion. Was the cruelty of the Holy Knights towards Olivia not even a consideration?

No, in this case, they would probably say it was necessary to lead her down the right path.

There's no way I can deal with everything she says and does based on her pre-drawn conclusion.

This person won't be convinced by my words.

"Please, Reinhardt. Stay away from Olivia. I'm begging you. If only you weren't here. If only you weren't here, Olivia could return to the right path. I'll even kneel down, I'll do whatever you ask. Just let Olivia go. Please. Before something more tragic happens. Let Olivia go. Before something irreversible happens."

Her attitude that she could do anything for Olivia, even though she dislikes me, felt unfamiliar. This was a person who even attempted suicide for Olivia's sake.

Why is she going this far?

I find myself thinking like Olivia.

Just as Olivia couldn't understand why she had to go through this, neither could I.

"Let me make a request too. Just leave her alone. Even if that person is a once-in-a-century genius, there must be others with similar faith and abilities. Why do you insist on sticking to Olivia, who clearly dislikes it? You're not lacking in abilities or faith yourself, but I don't know what you're expecting from Olivia. Why don't you just do it yourself?"

"No! Olivia is! Olivia is unique! Only Olivia is worthy! Olivia was born with that destiny!"

Lydia Schmitt shouted, and passersby began to take notice of our quarrel.

As if they sensed that something was not quite right.

"Only Olivia can unite our five great religions and become the Holy Emperor of the soon-to-be-established Millennial Empire. It is her destiny."

“…What?"

My mind seemed to freeze at the sudden nonsense.

Millennial Empire?

What kind of nonsense is this?

"Olivia was born with that destiny. Only Olivia is worthy. Her appearance, talent, ability, and character all suit her for this role. You're the one ruining it."

All I could read from Lydia Schmitt's eyes was a pitch-black abyss.

She was a believer in the divine, but only darkness could be seen in her eyes.

It seemed that Lydia Schmitt wanted more than just the restoration of Olivia's faith.

He appeared to desire something grander, to become the master of a great destiny.

But there was a word that seemed to stick in my throat.

The Millennium Empire.

What on earth did that mean?

If Lydia Schmitt was simply a madwoman, it would be a matter of dealing with just her.

But there was something that shouldn't be easily dismissed.

"What is this Millennium Empire you speak of?"

Lydia Schmitt's expression hardened once again at my counter-question.

“…There's no need for someone like you to know."

It seemed as if she had made a slip of the tongue and was trying to hide it.

It wasn't mere nonsense.

There was something there, a feeling so intense that it led to saying something she shouldn't have. If it were just a passing remark, there would be no need to muddle through it.

A few inferences could be made.

While there might be those who encouraged Olivia to regain her faith for their personal desires, Lydia Schmitt's intentions seemed different.

It appeared that Lydia Schmitt was talking about the independence of the Five Great Holy Religions. Although they were already independent forces, it seemed as though

she intended to establish an entirely new nation.

The possibility that this was merely Lydia Schmitt's delusion couldn't be ruled out. But if there was a group with such thoughts, the situation would become complicated.

One might have to consider another revolutionary force.

In that case, it wouldn't simply be a matter of shaking off a single madwoman.

Naturally, my anger grew.

They were ultimately forcing their thoughts on Olivia, weren't they?

Why did they have to be so insistent?

Moreover, the look on her face showed that she didn't even think her actions were unreasonable. The attitude of not even considering the right or wrong of what she was doing or what she wanted, because it must be right, was extremely repulsive.

A corrupted clergyman is disgusting, but

A fanatic is both disgusting and unpleasant.

There were many things I wanted to say.

Numerous harsh words boiled in my mind, but I couldn't utter them.

I quietly watched Lydia Schmitt.

She had openly followed me on the streets.

I could see her nervously clenching and unclenching her hands.

She was someone who would risk her life to bring Olivia back.

That meant she might be someone who would kill to bring Olivia back.

There was no need to go to such extremes.

A mix of rage, hatred, resentment, and an unpleasant, obsessive gaze told me everything.

An irreversible event.

A tragedy might occur, as she had said.

Wasn't that the only thing she was saying?

This woman was trying to kill me.

Considering her mention of the Millennium Empire, she seemed to have some sort of sense of mission.

Regardless of what others might think, she would try to kill me because she believed it was justice. It wasn't difficult to predict, having already witnessed her madness once.

That's why I tried to persuade her by asking her to stay away from me.

Now that I've been rejected, it's highly likely that Lydia Schmitt's choice would be to kill me.

I don't want to fight on the streets, but if my opponent starts using force, I'll have to use it as well.

There is a high probability that if I fight this person, I will die.

So far, I've been fortunate many times, but there's no guarantee that my luck will hold this time.

Would her reaction change if she knew I was the owner of Tiamata?

There would be no item as effective as Tiamata for a fanatic like her.

However, I can't rely on Tiamata alone.

If she finds out I'm the Champion of Tu’an, she might try to persuade Olivia with me or put me through another annoying ordeal.

Lydia Schmitt is too dangerous.

And she is highly likely to know an even more dangerous fact.

First, I need to find out what that is.

"It seems like we have a lot to discuss, you and I."

"If you don't stay away from Olivia, I have nothing more to say to you…"

"How about we go somewhere quiet and talk?"

"!"

At my words, Lydia Schmitt's expression hardens.

It's not because she's flustered, but because my words are completely unexpected.

She had been trying to kill me, whether or not people were watching, and now her prey is suddenly suggesting going somewhere secluded to talk.

She must be prepared to kill me and be taken to prison to stand trial for murder.

However, if she kills me in secret and hides my body, she won't get caught.

It would be the perfect crime, making me, a thorn in her side, disappear.

"…I'm fine with that."

Lydia Schmitt smiles chillingly, as if she's dreaming of a perfect crime.

Chills run down my spine, but I have no choice.

"But I have some business to take care of first. Let's settle that first. It won't take long. You can come along if you want."

"Fine."

She'll soon realize that she should have attacked me now if she wanted to kill me.

Your greed for a perfect crime will ruin everything.

It was quite fascinating to see myself calmly engaging in such thoughts and conversations, putting my life on the line.

The business I had in mind had changed slightly from what I originally planned.

Nevertheless, it doesn't make a huge difference. The ultimate goal is still to find Eleris.

Thinking that her prey is willingly walking into a trap, Lydia Schmitt looked quite pleased.

Since it was daytime, Eleris must have been at her shop.

We had already arrived at the Aligar shopping district, so the journey with Lydia Schmitt wasn't long.

Lydia Schmitt didn't ask where we were going or what my business was. She must be thinking about how to deal with me in a quiet place once my errand is over.

The hunter had no idea she had become the prey.

Yes, how could she imagine that?

Since Lydia Schmitt is the unrestricted tournament winner, she must be confident in subduing me, and I know that as well.

No matter what I do, even if I manage to escape without her noticing, she would be confident in catching me.

-Thud

"Ah."

Eleris, as always, was lounging behind the counter when I entered, visibly startled. Then, she was surprised once again upon seeing an unfamiliar female temple student behind me.

Eleris must have been perplexed by the situation, but right now, things were not looking good.

I speak up in the shop as if I had come in for a reason.

In fact, I did have a reason.

"Don't ask any questions, just cast some noise-canceling magic around us."

"Yes."

Although Eleris did not understand the situation, she immediately followed my instruction. Noise-canceling magic was cast, and Lydia Schmitt seemed to sense the strange atmosphere, furrowing her brow slightly.

Of course, she couldn't have predicted this.

She couldn't have expected me to enter any random shop and casually give orders to the shop owner.

"And if you have any binding or disabling spells, try using them on this person. Use something strong. This isn't a normal situation."

"Yes."

"You!"

Eleris still didn't understand the situation, but she followed my instructions precisely.

As Lydia Schmitt's face showed signs of being alarmed, she tried to take action, but Eleris was faster.

-Clang! Clank!

"Ugh!"

With an alarmingly fast casting speed, jet-black chains suddenly appeared from thin air and bound Lydia Schmitt's limbs.

-Clack! Clatter!

Her arms were raised into the air, and her legs were tied to the ground. Despite exerting her divine power and struggling, the chains summoned by Eleris only rattled slightly and did not budge.

"You, you brat! What, what is the meaning of this!"

It was natural for Lydia Schmitt to be shocked, as no one could have predicted that she would suddenly find herself in this state.

-Thud!

Eleris then completely locked the shop door to ensure that no one could witness this scene. Eleris did not question me while doing as she was told.

"You, you… you can't keep me like this! Who is that person and what does she want with me!"

Lydia Schmitt could not understand the situation, but just as she had no intention of understanding me, I had no intention of making her understand the situation either.

"Release me! Release me now!"

As she had said only what she wanted to say to me, I would say only what I wanted to say to her.

-Swish

"Do you know what this is?"

"Tia… Tiamata? That, that's… How do you have…?"

"It may be hard to believe, but I am the owner of Tiamata. People in the world call me the Champion of Tu'an… something like that."

The person who had tried to kill me suddenly found herself trapped and saw Tiamata being summoned.

It must have been an unbelievable situation. However, Lydia could not possibly think

that the Tiamata in my hand was a fake. No matter how long the object had been hidden from the world, she couldn't fail to recognize the divine nature that emanated from its appearance and the artifact itself.

Before making an extreme decision, Lydia Schmitt tried to persuade me to distance myself from Olivia.

So, I give her a chance.

"From now on, you need to answer my questions carefully."

"Stalling, glaring with weird eyes, or spouting nonsense will not be tolerated…"

I tapped Lydia Schmitt's cheek with the flat side of Tiamata's blade.

"The divine power you so adore might just cleave your head in two."

With her eyes wide open, Lydia Schmitt could only stare at me.

CHAPTER 318

Being a fanatic is inherently strange.

They may seem powerless before the gods, yet they possess something called free will.

Lydia Schmitt tried to kill me. She didn't actually say so, but the circumstances were so clear that there was no need to confirm it verbally.

Lydia Schmitt, who obediently followed me with such intent, eventually discovered that the person she tried to kill was, in fact, the Champion of Tu’an.

Lydia Schmitt, who believed her devotion to the gods to be unrivaled, had no choice but to admit that she had tried to kill the Champion of Tu’an without recognizing him.

Fanatics never doubt the gods.

Typically, they don't doubt themselves either.

They appear to believe in the gods, but ultimately, they believe in their own faith in the gods.

Because of their loyalty to the gods, they believe that they cannot be wrong.

However, the truth unfolded differently from her belief.

The person she tried to kill was actually chosen by the gods.

At the moment Lydia Schmitt acknowledged this, she had to admit that she was wrong.

But fanatics cannot do that. If they could, they would not have fallen into the abyss of fanaticism in the first place.

So.

Lydia Schmitt could not admit that her intended actions were the greatest sin against the gods.

She had to create a logic that she was not wrong without denying or doubting the gods.

"It should belong to Olivia! That… that item shouldn't be in your hands!"

Naturally, Lydia Schmitt labeled me as a thief of the sacred object.

It seemed that she had created a logic that the Tiamata, a sacred object of Tu'an, must belong to Olivia since Olivia had served Tu'an.

"Yes, it belongs to Senior Olivia."

"What?"

"It's a shared possession. I can't show it to you right away, but this Tiamata is mine as well as Senior Olivia's. Our souls are bound together simultaneously, I guess. Oh, you might not like hearing this… but what can I do? To put it simply…"

I grinned and whispered into Lydia Schmitt's ear.

"Olivia and I are, in essence, soul-bound to each other."

"Yo-you! You filthy, despicable worm! How dare you speak such impure words to the representative of Tu'an!"

Representative of Tu'an?

From the Holy Empress of the Millennium Empire to the representative of Tu'an now?

What on earth does this crazy woman think of Olivia?

It seemed that she could not accept the fact that the goddess of purity had formed a soul bond with someone like me.

"You demon! Give back the Tiamata! It's not something for the likes of you to hold! The Tiamata is a sacred object passed down through generations to the priests and

holy knights of Tu'an, not for unbelievers like you!"

"Is the soundproofing really effective?"

"Yes, it is."

I found this quite fascinating.

Inwardly, I had thought that if I showed Tiamata, she might prostrate herself and apologize.

I hadn't expected such a reaction, but seeing her hatred for me intensify upon witnessing Tiamata was intriguing in its own way.

Lydia Schmitt was not a faithful servant of the gods.

She was just one of those people who interpreted and accepted the gods in her own way.

And so, wasn't she spouting such nonsense because she didn't want to admit she was wrong?

If I were an unworthy person, why had Tu'an allowed me to become Tiamata's master?

Then she would have to admit Tu'an was imperfect.

Now, Lydia was essentially saying that Tu'an made a mistake because she didn't want to admit she was wrong.

Fanaticism was no different from self-suggestion.

All humans needed logic to protect themselves.

Thus, didn't Lydia Schmitt ultimately acknowledge her own belief in deciding to kill me, rather than the gods?

Fanaticism was not steadfast faith and piety, but merely a crazed belief.

Fanaticism could not be faithful.

I had no intention of discussing with Lydia Schmitt, who was experiencing cognitive dissonance, what faith and gods were.

Lydia Schmitt gave me a chance.

To part ways with Olivia.

Because I refused, Lydia Schmitt tried to kill me.

I also gave her a chance.

I told her that I was Tu'an's champion, the one she was trying to kill. Would she still do it?

Lydia Schmitt insisted that I had used some underhanded trick to snatch Tiamata, didn't even believe that Olivia and I shared ownership, and would go even crazier if she found out.

She believed that my very existence harmed Olivia's purity.

"I don't know what dirty trick you used to steal Tiamata, which should have been Olivia's, but divine retribution awaits you!"

She was now utterly convinced of it. She would continuously create arguments and logic to protect herself.

"I'll make you regret it! I don't know what kind of conspiracy you had with that evil sorcerer…"

-Smack!

"Ouch!"

I struck Lydia Schmitt's chattering head with the flat side of Tiamata's blade.

"Quiet. From now on, just answer the questions."

"…"

"What is this Millennium Empire?"

"…"

"Can't understand a word you're saying. Want a taste of divine power?"

"Don't discuss divine power with your blasphemous mouth!"

“…Communication isn't working."

I looked toward Eleris.

"I'm sorry, Eleris."

"Yes."

There was no need to hide anything in front of someone who was going to die anyway.

"Can't you make her listen better? Or at least, she's got so much energy, but it's too much."

"…"

Eleris silently stared at me, then slowly walked toward me. Without a word, she stood beside me and gently pressed her face against the bound Lydia Schmitt's face.

"Must I reveal everything?"

I know what she's talking about.

"Ah."

Eleris seemed to take a deep breath, closed her eyes, and then opened them again.

"!"

Her eyes revealed crimson irises and slit black pupils. At this overwhelming sight, Lydia Schmitt's lips trembled in shock.

"Vam… Vam… Vamp… Vampire…? H-how… How… How did…?"

Lydia looked back and forth between me and Eleris. It must be hard for her to believe that I, who held Tiamata, was controlling a vampire as my servant.

That's right.

In fact, much of what Lydia Schmitt said was wrong, but much was also right.

No, rather, it was an understatement.

She called me a demon-like creature.

I'm not just a demon, but rather the more powerful Demon King.

I can only be an even more evil existence than whatever Lydia Schmitt imagined or defined.

Lydia had underestimated me.

As things continued to surpass the limits of her imagination, Lydia Schmitt was on the verge of losing her mind.

Eleris, who had revealed her true form, brought her face as close as possible to Lydia Schmitt's, staring deeply into her eyes.

"I am a Lord Vampire. I am called Eleris, the ruler of Tuesday among the seven nights."

"Ahh… Ah… Aahh…"

Lydia Schmitt was already immersed in fear as events surpassed her understanding.

"Even if you say nothing, with just one sip of your blood, I can make you my slave and learn everything. No matter how strong your will, resistance will be futile."

"Ahh… Uh… Uuhh… Uu… U…"

"Do you want to live as a human by revealing the secrets that will eventually be uncovered? Or would you rather spend the rest of your life as a vampire due to the secrets you hide?"

With her eyes wide open, Eleris whispered these words as if forcing them into Lydia Schmitt's eyes.

"Make your choice."

Secrets are meaningless in front of me.

Eleris forces this realization into Lydia Schmitt's mind.

"You… You are… What on earth… are you?"

"You were right. I'm not a worm, but something like a demon."

"That's… That's… That's impossible… How can someone like you… be in the temple…?"

"You're funny. You called me a demon, but now that I'm really a demon-like being, you say it's impossible? So, you called me a demon, even though you knew I wasn't one?"

"…"

She might have shouted that I was a demon, but she probably didn't think I would actually be something similar.

Since my mere servant, a Lord Vampire, had so easily subdued her, she must think I am an even more incredible being.

Although my existence is indeed like that, in truth, there was no need to tell her the private fact that Eleris is much stronger than me.

"I'll ask you for the second time, what is this Millennium Empire? If you don't answer, you might end up becoming a vampire."

Upon hearing my words, the color drained from Lydia Schmitt's face, leaving her ashen and pale.

"Do you think you can commit suicide if you become a vampire? Your life and death

would be determined by the will of your master. If you want to try something like becoming a vampire cleric, just keep provoking me."

I wasn't sure about the actual process of becoming a thrall or a slave, but I bluffed based on what I thought.

Lydia Schmitt was already overwhelmed by fear, so she would believe whatever I said as truth, regardless of its accuracy.

She had been trying to deceive me just a moment ago, but now she was the one deluded.

She was far stronger than an active holy knight, but she had been subdued so easily, and that was merely the power of a mere servant.

A servant of me.

Possessor of Tiamata, a being of unknown origin who referred to itself as something akin to a demon.

From this point on, it was not deception but delusion.

She would start to think of me as something beyond her wildest imagination.

Keeping a secret was impossible.

Lydia was trembling, perhaps thinking of herself as a vampire.

She may have imagined herself destroying such an existence, but she had never considered becoming one.

There was no point in committing suicide as a vampire. Her thoughts would be dominated anyway.

To fall from a promising future as a holy knight of Ares to a being that fed on human blood and lurked in the shadows of the night.

Could there be a greater insult in her entire life? The mere thought was terrifying and shameful, and Lydia trembled as if she were being whipped.

Sometimes, secrets are incredibly weak.

If you realize that hiding them is ultimately meaningless, you have no choice but to reveal them all too easily.

Even secrets worth dying to protect are not exempt.

"Th-the… Millennium Empire… it's a plan… pursued by… the 'Nameless Monastery'…"

Lydia Schmitt had begun addressing me with extreme reverence.

The Nameless Monastery.

Another unknown concept had appeared. Lydia Schmitt's face displayed a mix of misery, wretchedness, and fear as she spoke of it.

"What is this Nameless Monastery?"

"It's a… religious community… composed of members from various sects and organizations within the Five Great Religions…"

"So the purpose of this Nameless Monastery is to unify the power of the Five Great Religions and establish a religious state? And they're planning to appoint Olivia Lanze as the first Holy Empress?"

"If I were to summarize… yes…"

She seemed to have plenty of objections, but fear prevented her from speaking up carelessly.

Both Eleris and I couldn't help but become serious.

"So, in the end, they're no different from the republicans, just with different motives?"

"It seems so…"

The extremist group known as the Nameless Monastery within the Five Great Religions had been seeking to establish an independent state separate from the empire.

Considering the title of "Holy Emperor," it could be assumed that they intended to build a system similar to that of the empire.

"Do you know how big their force is?"

"…"

I clicked my tongue as I watched Lydia, who hesitated to speak and shook her head.

"Don't try to sneak in lies. If I think you're lying, I'll turn you into a vampire and verify it again."

"No, no! I, absolutely! I will not mix in any lies!"

Lydia, who seemed to fear becoming a vampire more than death itself, shook her head vigorously while still bound.

"Their current power is not large, but the scale continues to… grow. Inside, they are soon expected to… have a force comparable to one of the five major religions."

"…Damn it."

"This is serious."

Fortunately, their force seemed small for now, but their expansion speed must be tremendous.

Soon, they would have a force comparable to a single religion.

Moreover, they were not formed within a single religion but within the Holy Knights and the internal factions of the five major religions. The fact that the radicals, excluding the moderates, were gathered together meant they were already a group capable of exerting influence throughout the entire five Holy Religions.

The situation was more serious than I had thought.

Religious forces following the revolutionary forces.

"This is driving me crazy…"

I grabbed my head in frustration, and Eleris let out a deep sigh as if the ground were collapsing.

The empire was in a crisis.

If the revolutionary forces and this matter exploded simultaneously, the empire would be torn apart in chaos.

Lydia seemed to not understand the situation.

For now, she seemed to be sure that Eleris and I were evil beings, but she appeared to be very anxious about the crisis that had befallen the empire.

She would be more surprised if she knew the truth.

The Demon King and his subordinates were rolling around worrying about the collapse of the empire.

But it was true that it felt maddening and crazy.

"By the way, how long has it been since this nameless monastery was created?"

I understood that they were a secret religious organization, but I needed to know whether they had recently expanded their power or if they had been around for a long time like the revolutionary forces. If it was an existing force, why had they grown so explosively recently?

"…It hasn't been long since they were created."

"Really? But why are so many people flocking to them?"

"…Because of religious persecution."

What was this about?

At my question, Lydia Schmitt clenched her teeth and looked down.

"Many believers think that the fall of the former Holy Knights' leader, Riverrier Lanze, was due to the empire starting religious persecution to keep the Holy Knights in check."

"Ah."

Just hearing that, I could roughly picture it.

From the perspective of people in the religious community who didn't know the reality, the fall of the war hero Riverrier Lanze could be seen as such.

No.

“…By any chance, is Riverrier Lanze the one who created the nameless monastery?"

"…”

Lydia Schmitt's silence, as if she couldn't say anything.

"It seems to be true."

That was already an answer.

"It's not that there are many believers who truly think so, it must be because Riverrier Lanze spread such rumors. He must be saying that it happened like this, unrelated to what he actually did, due to political pressure."

"No! The leader was subjected to unjust slander…!"

"Shut up. You're a Temple student, you should know the situation. What slander are you talking about?"

"It's an unavoidable act to awaken Olivia, who is wavering in her faith, to the right path…”

"Ah, dammit. Didn't I tell you to shut up?"

"…”

From the beginning, Riverrier Lanze had believed that everything he did to Olivia

was justified. I don't want to discuss this matter with Lydia Schmitt any further.

After his fall from grace, he was doing something somewhere, but he ended up forming a secret society and causing mischief.

That means this event is ultimately due to Olivia Lanche's survival, a turning point in history.

Yes.

In the end, this mess is my mess.

Damn it.

Olivia and Charlotte, both of them.

Do individuals whose very existence corresponds to turning points in history always go through crises like this once more?

If Riverrier Lanze had remained in his position as the head of the Holy Knights, none of this would have happened. That means Riverrier Lanze really did have the ambition to separate the Five Great Holy Religions from the Empire and establish a Holy Empire. But he couldn't have pushed for it too quickly, so it must have been unrelated to the main story.

However, after his fall from power, he chose to form a secret society.

Riverrier Lanze would have claimed his fall was due to the political suppression of religion, and used it to incite resentment among religious figures.

He gathered people with the logic of creating a country solely for the religious, and formed the secret society called the Nameless Monastery.

Riverrier Lanze, who cleverly exploited the victim mentality of being oppressed, is now frighteningly increasing the number of secret society members.

His own achievements as a hero of the Demon War must have backed him up.

At this rate, a massive force equivalent to a single religion of the Five Great Holy Religions will be created, and those bastards will be able to seize and shake the roots

of the Five Great Holy Religions.

Riverrier Lanze plans to make Olivia the Holy Empress.

He would want to sit on the throne himself, but that would be laughable.

If he were to create a Holy Empire and claim himself as its first Holy Emperor, his sincerity would be questioned.

However, if he were to create a land for the gods and seat a princess with rare talent, character, and ability on the continent, it would at least create some legitimacy.

Moreover, Riverrier Lanze's only chance for redemption is through Olivia's testimony.

If she says she was not treated unjustly by Riverrier Lanze, all suspicions surrounding him would turn into the Empire's conspiracy, regardless of the truth.

In fact, having seen her abilities firsthand, Olivia's very existence feels like legitimacy itself.

He wants to sit on the throne himself, but he can't reveal his greed, so he aims to make Olivia the Holy Empress.

The reason for Riverrier Lanze's obsession with Olivia must be that she is a being capable of both fulfilling her destiny and winning the lottery of self-confidence.

"Such a damn bastard."

As I spat out those words, Lydia Schmitt looked even more terrified.

This cannot be left alone.

Riverrier Lanze, and of course, the Nameless Monastery are seeds of great chaos.

I have to sweep them all away. If not now, while their influence is not that strong, it will be impossible to deal with them later.

But how? If I falsely accuse them of plotting rebellion and force the royal family to act, actual religious persecution, which never existed, will occur.

In that case, even those who were moderate will undoubtedly turn into extremists.

The involvement of the royal family and government forces in this matter itself will already trigger a massive conflict.

For now, I need to organize my thoughts. I have to think about how and in what way to infiltrate.

"Alright, last question. Was it the Nameless Order who ordered you to try and kill me?"

Lydia Schmitt genuinely wanted to kill me. But she might have wanted to kill me and received orders to do so.

At my words, Lydia Schmitt shook her head violently.

"No, it wasn't… This… This was my own decision…"

"Are you sure? Are you lying because you're afraid I'll mess with those bastards?"

"No! No! It was originally a different plan! It was my own decision!"

How much did Lydia Schmitt hate becoming a vampire?

"Really? Then what was the other plan?"

"…"

Lydia Schmitt hesitated, as if it was difficult to speak.

However, knowing what I might say eventually, she reluctantly opened her mouth.

"They have Adriana… The second-year student from the Temple… The Monastery has taken her…"

"What?"

A completely unexpected name made my head go blank.

Why Adriana?

Why is Adriana being mentioned here?

The image of Adriana flashed through my mind. The last memory of walking together near the Tu'an Monastery swept through my head.

What were they planning to do to Adriana?

No, what have they done?

"Tell me everything."

If I had something like a thread of reason…

It just snapped.

Olivia was in her dormitory room.

Though the start time of the Miss Temple Contest was approaching and she should have gone to the venue in advance to prepare, Olivia was waiting in her room, following Reinhardt's brief request to wait.

She didn't know what he intended to do, but he seemed to have a plan.

Still, if it got too late, she would have to leave soon. Olivia didn't know what Reinhardt was up to, but if there was no news within the next 30 minutes, she planned to head to the venue.

Knock knock

Having waited for a while, Olivia jumped up from her seat when she heard a knock on the door.

"Reinhardt, what on earth…?"

"…?"

However, the person knocking on Olivia's door was not Reinhardt but a dormitory maid.

"Ah, I'm sorry."

The maid smiled warmly as she handed something to Olivia.

"I'm not sure who you're waiting for, but this is a letter for you, Miss Olivia."

"Ah… Thank you."

Olivia took the letter from the maid and closed the door.

The letter had no sender's name, only an address. Who could have sent such a letter?

Olivia opened the envelope.

Inside, there were only two lines of text.

[My daughter, do you remember the name Adriana?]

[She is with me now.]

"!"

The only person who would call her 'daughter' was Riverrier Lanze.

She didn't know why, or how it happened, but he had Adriana with him now.

Reinhardt, Adriana, and Evia from Class B of the first grade.

The three of them had played a crucial role in saving her. By now, the rumor had spread, and everyone knew about it.

Soon, it would mean that these three were instrumental in Riverrier Lanze's downfall.

Reinhardt and Evia were students of the Temple. Thus, they were dangerous to meddle with. That's why it was relatively easy for Riverrier Lanze to target Adriana.

Whether it was for revenge or any other reason, Riverrier Lanze had Adriana with him.

The sender's name was not written on the letter, only the address from which it was sent.

It must have been an invitation to come to that location.

Using Adriana as bait, her adoptive father was summoning her.

She didn't know what he wanted to say, or what he intended to do to Adriana.

All she knew was that the child who had saved her was now in danger for that very reason.

As if possessed, Olivia rose from her seat and threw open the door of her dormitory room.

"Why…? Why on earth…?"

What could he possibly want from her?

Why would he go to such lengths?

Grinding her teeth in anger, Olivia raced down the dormitory corridor.

The Miss Temple contest had already been completely erased from her mind.

CHAPTER 319

Adriana was taken away by the Nameless Monastery.

To be precise, by Riverrier Lanze.

First and foremost, Riverrier Lanze aimed for the jackpot by having Olivia Lanze as his defender, and secondly, he sought to make Olivia Lanze a mascot that would represent his own desires.

Riverrier Lanze had originally intended to make Olivia the next commander of the Holy Knight Order. It was likely that the plan for the Holy Empire had already been laid out as well.

Due to an unforeseen variable called dethronement, Riverrier Lanze had adopted the strategy of creating a secret religious organization.

Riverrier Lanze's dethronement had caused a backlash within the religious circles, and as a result, he still held influence there, which was growing ever larger.

Adriana's departure from the temple had, in fact, an adverse effect on her safety.

Riverrier Lanze would try to lure Olivia in.

And Olivia would have no choice but to accept the deal involving Adriana's life.

There was no option to forfeit, as in the final match against Lydia Schmitt.

As long as Adriana was held hostage, Olivia would become Riverrier Lanze's puppet.

The sun had set, and it was already night.

I saw Lydia Schmitt, tied up and hanging her head inside Eleris's shop.

Today, Lydia Schmitt had suddenly used a dangerous power called Berserk in the final match.

And she had continually tried to persuade Olivia to return to the embrace of the divine. However, in the end, Olivia had forfeited.

It seemed like a clumsy plan even to me.

Moreover, Lydia Schmitt had repeatedly warned Olivia that something more tragic would happen if things continued as they were.

I thought it was the nonsense of a madwoman.

She had been continually warning that Adriana would be hurt if Olivia didn't obediently return.

As the saying goes, "The arm bends inward."

Lydia Schmitt had used such a desperate method to persuade Olivia because she didn't want Adriana, a fellow member of the Five Great Holy Religions, to be hurt.

And that she had tried to kill me as well.

I wasn't a member of the Five Great Holy Religions, and I must have been considered the mastermind behind Olivia's corruption.

She had judged that it would be better for me to die than Adriana.

That was why this bizarre incident had occurred today.

Adriana was in danger as things stood.

I had to act as quickly as possible.

"Riverrier Lanze, where is he?"

"…"

The revolutionary forces were already somewhat late, but the nameless monastery order created after Riverrier Lanze's dethronement was still not very large.

If it wasn't crushed at this stage, something uncontrollable would happen.

Lydia Schmitt believed that I was an extremely dangerous and evil existence, the extent of which she couldn't comprehend.

She might think that Riverrier Lanze would be killed by me, so she couldn't say anything.

But if she didn't speak, there was a way to force her to open her mouth.

Tears welled up in Lydia Schmitt's eyes.

"Please… Please…”

Unable to say the words asking to be released or that she couldn't speak, she began to sob.

"Just… please kill me…”

She yearned for death instead. Knowing that we would not simply kill her, she believed that the best choice for her at this moment was for us to grant her the mercy of death.

"Please, please… death, a clean death… please…”

The moment she revealed Riverrier Lanze's location, it would be a grave act of betrayal, something she couldn't bear.

But becoming a vampire was also unbearable for her.

That's why Lydia Schmitt begged us, the two wicked beings, for death. In front of Lydia Schmitt, who was tied up and pleading for death, I crouched down.

"Why are you crying?"

I brought my hand to the weeping Lydia Schmitt's cheek and gently wiped away her tears.

"Why is this a betrayal? I don't understand."

"I am the Champion of Tu'an, so all my actions should represent the will of Tu'an more than anything else. Rather than Riverrier Lanze, who was expelled from the

position of Holy Knight Commander and created a faction within the Five Great Holy Religions out of lust for power, shouldn't my actions align with the will of God?"

"Hu, hu-hu… ugh…"

At my argument, Lydia Schmitt's sobbing grew even heavier.

"God is omnipotent."

"Even though I may be a wicked being in your eyes, if I were someone who shouldn't control Tiamata, then I couldn't have become its master. Whether I meet a miserable end or a greater hero appears to take Tiamata away from me, all of that would be part of Tu'an's plan until it happens, wouldn't it? Isn't that right?"

"God is omnipotent."

"Exactly. Therefore, no matter what happens to me, as part of the plan of an omnipotent being, my actions should align more with the will of God than someone like Riverrier Lanze. Isn't that right?"

"Thus, if my will is the will of God, then what Tu'an wants is happening right now."

"The Nameless Monastery is heresy."

"So, it must disappear."

"Now, senior, don't cry. There's no need to cry."

"Senior, you're following the blindly obedient will of God."

"Senior, right now, you're not cooperating with some evil, mysterious being but with the Champion of Tu'an. How is this a betrayal?"

Holding Lydia Schmitt's face in both hands, I smiled at her. Despair was etched into her eyes.

"Senior, you can now follow the right path. You just strayed from it for a while. So, this isn't betrayal."

My words were being denied internally, but the desire to believe them was all too

apparent.

Why on earth is this betrayal?

It's not just something I'm saying; I genuinely believe it.

"Repent."

Repent.

Come back to the right path now.

Why is it an act of disloyalty to escape the clutches of the false prophet Riverrier Lanze and join the Champion of Tu'an?

The seeming contradiction of a champion of the Goddess of Purity controlling a vampire, her very antithesis, didn't matter much anymore.

Once one accepts that everything is by divine will, it becomes easier.

If all of this is part of the plan devised by the gods.

If one accepts that.

Then becoming a vampire isn't out of the question.

In fact, it could be considered even more glorious.

"I… really… is it… is it really like that…?"

Lydia Schmitt looks at me with tearful eyes, desperate for an answer.

This isn't persuasion.

She has collapsed.

"Trust me, senior."

She replaces her former fanaticism with a new one.

"Trusting me is no different from serving the gods."

Fear drives people mad.

And the madness is no different for someone who has already gone mad.

If Lydia Schmitt submits to me, she will fabricate any logic to justify me.

Every suspicion and doubt I possess. All of it will be shoved aside under the belief that everything is because I am the champion of the gods, and it is all part of their divine will.

"All of this… is really part of the gods' plan…"

Yes.

I am a god more powerful than the Five Great Deities.

So trusting me is no different from serving the gods.

I gently stroked the head of Lydia Schmitt, who sobbed and knelt before me.

I gritted my teeth.

I had hoped for a day without any trouble.

At least for today.

But now, I have somewhere I must go.

In front of the weeping Lydia Schmitt, I turn my head and look at Eleris.

"Call Sarkegaar and Loyar."

This is not something I can handle alone.

Even if I could, it's not something I should do alone.

It's not just a matter of the nameless monastery.

Signs of division are spreading in all directions.

The empire must not crumble.

"We all go together."

"Yes."

This incident must happen under the name of Valier, not Reinhardt.

The enemy of humanity must appear again.

Miss Temple Contest participants' waiting room.

Ellen was receiving her final check while dressed in her gown.

"You look great."

“…I'm relieved."

The Miss Temple Contest was drawing closer. The contest was held in a much larger venue and on a different scale compared to the cross-dressing competition.

Though it wasn't the main stadium where the tournament finals took place, the contest was held in an enormous concert hall.

Liana had been watching Cliffman's side until now but came over to Ellen.

"But I don't see your senior anywhere."

Liana tilted her head while fixing Ellen's makeup.

“…She'll come."

Either she had already arrived and she hadn't seen her, or she was running late. It had to be one or the other. Ellen was more worried about something else.

Reinhardt had left the dormitory in the morning and hadn't been seen all day.

When she left, not only most of the A-class members but also the B-class guys saw her off. They would almost all come to watch the contest.

But Reinhardt wasn't there.

"…"

"What has Reinhardt been doing all day? I haven't seen him at all."

Liana grumbled.

"Well, it's his loss if he can't see you."

Liana had eagerly helped Ellen with her makeup, saying that missing out on seeing Ellen's beautiful appearance would be a loss in itself.

Ellen clenched the hem of her dress.

There's no way he won't come.

She knew that, but still, a strange uneasiness kept tickling her heart.

He must come.

She even told him to make sure he came.

There's no way he won't.

To calm her anxious heart, Ellen took several deep breaths.

Everyone was gathered.

Eleris, Sarkegaar, and even Loyar.

We moved through Eleris's mass teleport.

Since we were wearing our temple uniforms, we changed into our casual clothes left at Eleris's house.

-Flash!

The location was the outer area of the southern part of the Royal Road, a place quite far south of the Royal Road.

The place we arrived at was a small village set up in the southern part of the Royal Road.

The village was more like a few households living by farming in the outer area, with less than twenty households in total.

It was just one of many ordinary neighborhoods in the suburban area.

We teleported to a hillside in the outer area, which led to the crossroads of that neighborhood.

"Ma… mass teleport…"

Lydia Schmitt trembled after experiencing the mass teleport.

"…Will you be all right?"

At Loyar's question, I nodded with a stern expression.

I hadn't explained the situation in detail yet. I only mentioned that a big battle was coming, and we needed them.

Even if they find out later, Sarkegaar might not understand why I'm risking everything to prevent the spark of the empire's division, but I decided to trust Sarkegaar.

Above all, Sarkegaar is most needed right now.

Lydia Schmitt didn't know that Loyar and Sarkegaar still existed, so she was trembling in fear. She would think of them as terrifying entities, similar to Eleris.

Anyway, our target isn't that village.

"Beyond that hill… there's an abandoned monastery. There…"

"That's where the Nameless Monastery Order's temporary base is, right?"

"Yes."

Although they are an internal religious community, they ultimately cannot hold public gatherings. So for now, their regular meetings will be held in such outskirts until they have formed enough power.

They might have official gatherings once they grow larger in scale or begin to stand out in the religious world, but they haven't reached that point yet.

It's about killing a growing monster before it becomes unmanageable.

Lydia Schmitt had finally submitted, fearing what would happen if they refused to obey me.

Become a vampire or not.

Would she consider this God's will, too?

I possessed Tiamata, which served as an excellent tool for Lydia Schmitt to rationalize her actions.

Lydia Schmitt's disposal would have to wait until the matters concerning the Nameless Monastery and the Riverrier Lanze were resolved.

"Is Adriana held captive in the monastery?"

"Yes, that's correct. I can't remember the exact location, but it was definitely there."

Adriana was the bait to lure out Olivia.

Lydia Schmitt had tried to attack me, believing it would be better for me—an unbeliever and the main culprit behind Olivia's fall—to die rather than deceive Olivia with Adriana's life at stake.

It was unlikely that all members of the Nameless Order were in the abandoned monastery, but the key figures would be residing there.

Riverrier Lanze.

I had to kill Riverrier Lanze, the core of this entire mess, no matter what.

Whether that would resolve everything was uncertain. But one thing remained constant: it was something I had to do right now.

"What is their strength?"

"There are around twenty high-ranking knights in residence…"

"And their abilities?"

"All of them participated in the Demon War… They are the closest aides of the leader… Ah, no. Riverrier Lanze… They resigned with him when he stepped down as the leader…"

If they were Riverrier Lanze's closest aides, they would be the veterans of veterans who had experienced the Demon War together.

There would be other forces as well, but twenty high-ranking knights who had been through thick and thin, plus Riverrier Lanze…

Eleris was a powerful mage but also a vampire. It would undoubtedly be challenging to fight against the knights.

Our plan was not to engage in a head-on collision.

"Alright, the plan isn't too complicated."

First, we had to get Adriana out of there.

"Sarkegaar, infiltrate and locate Adriana. If you can sneak her out, do so."

Sarkegaar would first use his infiltration skills to determine Adriana's whereabouts.

"Come back if you can't bring her out. If you can't get her out, you can disguise yourself as Riverrier Lanze later and extract her."

Lydia Schmitt likely didn't understand what I was saying, but there was no time to explain.

"If we can safely bring Adriana out, Eleris will use large-scale destructive magic to annihilate the monastery. It would be great if we could kill them all at once, but that might not be possible. From there, it will be a battle."

Securing Adriana was the top priority.

The rest would be a massacre.

Eleris clenched her fists.

She didn't utter words like "I can't do it," and it wasn't the time for that.

It was evident that leaving the situation alone would lead to greater sacrifices.

Eleris had to agree that action had to be taken now.

"And, I need to show them."

"Show them what…?"

It was crucial to show whose actions these were.

The events today could not be kept secret.

Fortunately, this area was on the outskirts of the Imperial Domain. Even if a disturbance occurred, the royal family wouldn't be able to respond immediately. Because Lydia Schmitt was present, I refrained from making direct statements.

“Let us show our existence with certainty."

Remnants of the Demon Clan.

Their existence is revealed.

The revolutionary forces, the dissatisfaction of the Five Great Religions. The appearance of a common enemy temporarily mends the rift within the empire.

Sarkegaar still seemed clueless.

"Why on earth…”

"Wait."

As Sarkegaar began to express his doubts, Loyar suddenly raised his hand to stop him from speaking.

Loyar pointed down the hill.

"Someone is coming."

There was a road leading into the village.

"Olivia…!"

Lydia Schmitt's eyes widened, and I was just as shocked.

Olivia is coming.

She must have been lured to come here using Adriana. Olivia, with a desperate expression on her face, was running at a terrifying speed, heading somewhere.

Olivia gets involved as well.

There's no more time to waste.

"Sarkegaar, not just Adriana, but get that person too. Go in right now."

"…Yes, understood."

Sarkegaar transformed into a sparrow and darted across the night sky.

My heart raced like mad.

Adriana and Olivia.

Neither of them should be involved in this battle.

CHAPTER 320

"Where on earth is he?"

With her arms crossed, Liana de Grantz frowned and muttered.

The Miss & Mister Temple Contest had already begun.

Students from the Royal Class who came to watch the contest were all seated in the adjacent seats, spectating the event.

"Exactly…"

In response to Liana's irritated tone, Harriet whispered softly.

The contestants were all exceptional in appearance, and if they lacked a little in that regard, they each had at least one outstanding individual skill.

Ellen's contestant number was 9.

With contestant number 7 just finishing their turn, it would soon be Ellen's turn.

Kono Lint and other classmates were all present, except for Reinhardt.

What could he be doing?

Harriet's feelings were complicated.

She didn't know what Reinhardt was up to, but she thought he would definitely come, and yet he didn't.

According to Liana, the senior from the 5th grade also hadn't shown up in the waiting room for some reason.

What could they be doing?

It was a place they had to attend, so why weren't they coming?

Harriet thought that it was both a relief and a shame that Reinhardt hadn't shown up.

Harriet knew that her hope for Reinhardt not to come was cowardly, but she was also afraid to see what kind of appearance Ellen would have today.

Everyone else also found it strange that Reinhardt was nowhere to be seen.

Feeling anxious and restless, Harriet watched the situation without even knowing why she was so uneasy.

Contestant number 7, who had successfully completed their dance during the appeal time, albeit a little nervous, exited the stage and it was time for contestant number 8.

As that person's turn passed, Harriet grew increasingly anxious.

And then, contestant number 9.

-Now, we have a participant from the Royal Class. As you all know, the Royal Class numbers indicate their skill ranking. This participant is from Royal Class 1st year A-Class, an impressive number 2. It's Ellen!

As the applause echoed, Ellen walked onto the stage.

"…”

Harriet knew, of course.

Ellen had always been wearing school uniforms or training clothes, but she was well aware that Ellen had a remarkable appearance.

However, upon seeing Ellen fully dressed up, Harriet couldn't help but gape in awe.

It seemed that Liana had been searching for the color that best suited Ellen.

Ellen was now wearing a pure white dress. Her hair was tied up and adorned with a ribbon. Wearing matching white heels, Ellen seemed to stand out excessively compared to the other contestants, even in Harriet's eyes.

Liana looked satisfied with Ellen's appearance, and not only her classmates but also

the audience who didn't know Ellen stared at her in a daze.

She had practiced smiling relentlessly, and now, she wore a rather convincing smile that was nothing short of perfect.

That much was certain.

She could hold her own against Olivia.

That's what Harriet thought.

But no matter what others thought, Ellen simply stood there, smiling at the audience.

As if she were searching for something.

And as Ellen searched, her eyes met Harriet's, though it wasn't who she was looking for.

To be precise, her eyes met Harriet's before scanning the surrounding area, as if searching for someone who was nowhere to be found.

Finally, her gaze returned to Harriet.

It was a questioning look.

As if asking whether she had failed to find something, or someone.

Despite not being the person in question, Harriet felt a tightening in her heart.

Ellen seemed to be asking Harriet with her eyes.

Had Reinhardt not come?

Harriet couldn't figure out how to respond to that gaze. She found herself in a predicament, unable to laugh or cry.

She must have made a rather peculiar expression.

Ellen averted her eyes.

As if Harriet's discomfort had already provided the answer.

"Miss Ellen, is there a special reason why you decided to participate in Miss Temple?"

"Ah…"

Ellen opened her lips.

She must have had something to say.

Harriet saw Ellen, with her head down, trembling silently.

"Was there someone special you wanted to show your appearance to today?"

"…"

To the emcee's question, Ellen gave no response.

It was a question that struck right at Ellen's heart in this situation.

She needed to say something, but what? As Harriet saw Ellen desperately trying to find the right words, she clenched her teeth.

Just moments ago, Harriet had been relieved that Reinhardt hadn't come.

However, seeing Ellen in such a pitiful state, there was only one thought in Harriet's mind.

Ellen seemed on the verge of breaking.

Harriet did not wish for that, above all else.

'Where are you…?'

Unconsciously, Harriet clenched her fists.

'What are you doing…?'

Harriet resented Reinhardt for not coming.

Sarkegaar was keeping an eye on the situation from the outskirts of the abandoned monastery. The long-unused monastery was grand in scale, but its abandonment had left it with a sinister atmosphere.

Sarkegaar hadn't fully grasped the situation yet.

He had hurriedly followed at the mention of a task requiring some effort, but he didn't yet fully understand how things were unfolding.

All he knew was that there were people to rescue and enemies to eliminate.

He didn't know why it had to be this way, but it was a matter of revealing their existence in earnest.

As always, the objective was infiltration.

This time, it was a rescue mission, not a kidnapping.

Transformed into a sparrow, Sarkegaar easily flew over the monastery walls and headed towards the interior.

The security wasn't strict, but there were a few soldiers stationed here and there for guarding purposes.

Among them, only about twenty were considered the elite and posed a real threat.

The king had ordered the rescue of two women.

One woman trapped in the monastery.

And the woman who had just rushed into the monastery.

There were more people armed and capable of using divine power in the monastery than that.

Sarkegaar belonged to the demon race.

As such, he didn't mix well with divine power, not as much as the undead Eleris, at

least. That's why it wasn't too pleasant for him to infiltrate a place where high-ranking paladins were lurking.

However, there was no hesitation in carrying out the order.

Sarkegaar entered the monastery and carefully flew around, examining his surroundings.

"Where is Adriana?"

Without the need for such a meticulous search, Sarkegaar could hear the distressed voice coming from the courtyard.

It was the woman who had just arrived at the monastery.

"That will be answered after you give yours."

"You know what answer will come."

"Then you should know what will happen next."

"What do you want?"

Sarkegaar approached the scene of the conversation.

A courtyard within the monastery.

A middle-aged man sat on an old chair, centered around a bonfire, with a few paladins accompanying him. Opposite him was a young blonde woman dressed in the Temple's robes.

Sarkegaar knew the middle-aged man was Riverrier Lanze.

"Return to Tu’an. Retract all the testimonies you've made, and publicly declare your regret."

"…”

"The Holy Order of Odai will break away from the Empire, establish an independent Holy Empire, and you will be its first Holy Empress."

"What nonsense… That's absurd…”

Olivia stared at Riverrier Lanze.

Holy Empress.

Independence.

Olivia felt as if her breath was stifled just by hearing those words.

"What if I refuse?"

"Then unfortunate events will begin to unfold."

"Are you saying you'll kill Adriana? A young girl who hasn't even become a nun yet?"

"Let's call it an unavoidable sacrifice. God will understand."

As Riverrier Lanze used the name of God as a shield for his evil deeds, Olivia's expression displayed blatant contempt and disgust.

"Is this your way, Father? Are you so angry and resentful for losing power that you're willing to abandon humanity and faith?"

"This is a necessary choice to counter the threat to the Holy Order of Odai. Besides, you know that no one will be hurt if you promise to return."

"I won't go back."

"Will you not care even if something happens to the child who saved you?"

"…”

Despair and resentment flashed across Olivia's face.

Riverrier Lanze believed in the vision of making Olivia the Holy Empress, but in reality, he sought to restore his honor and regain power by making her recant her words.

"Why me? Why does it have to be me? Father, if you want something, just do it. I

really don't understand why you have to involve me in all of this. I don't know why you're threatening me like this, risking other people's lives as well…”

"As I always say, it's because there is no one more suitable than you."

"Please don't try to justify it like that…”

Olivia's tears finally spilled over in her sorrow.

"It's just because you want power, isn't it? You want to use me to satisfy your own desires. That's why you created this strange group. You want me to take back what I said to restore your honor, and to regain your power…”

"Olivia, I don't expect you to understand my intentions. But people have roles and destinies given to them, and I live for that."

Riverrier Lanze had an attitude that seemed completely unyielding.

"Until now, my role was to lead the forces in the Demon War to victory, and now it is to protect the Holy Knights of the Five Holy Religions from the clutches of the empire."

In front of the sobbing Olivia, Riverrier Lanze did not show even the slightest hint of personal emotion.

"And you are my successor. I decided that, and raised you accordingly. If it doesn't happen that way, I'll make it happen."

"But… why…?"

"Do you think the issue will end with just Adriana if you refuse?"

"!"

Olivia's eyes widened.

"Do you think Reinhardt will be left untouched?"

"Wh-what… what… are you saying…?"

As soon as the name Reinhardt was mentioned, Sarkegaar, who had been observing the situation, silently watched Riverrier Lanze.

Sarkegaar understood, though not completely, that Riverrier Lanze needed to be eliminated.

He was a threat to the Valier family. Sarkegaar clearly saw Olivia's expression contort as soon as Reinhardt's name was mentioned.

That woman was definitely an ally of Reinhardt. Sarkegaar also gained such certainty.

"If Adriana isn't enough, I'll simply find another person precious to you. Olivia, I called you here to show you that there is no end to this."

"…"

"Give up, Olivia. Don't cling to me in tears after a small pain becomes a greater one."

Olivia's eyes seemed to die upon hearing those words.

Adriana was just the beginning.

If she didn't give up, Riverrier Lanze would do whatever it took to destroy everything precious to Olivia, one by one.

Since threats and torture against Olivia personally wouldn't yield anything, Riverrier Lanze sought a way to make her give up from the outside.

Because he knew that she could bear her own pain, but not the pain of those precious to her.

Because he knew that Olivia, accustomed to sacrifice, would rather sacrifice herself than see her loved ones hurt.

As Lydia Schmitt attempted self-destruction using Berserk, it seemed as if she had given up on victory and made a sacrifice called "forfeit."

Riverrier Lanze knew how to manipulate Olivia.

"You are… a demon…”

Olivia said in a despairing tone. The surrounding knights flinched at her words, but Riverrier Lanze raised her hand to stop them from speaking rashly.

"If I can't escape… then this must be the right thing to do."

Olivia's body began to burn with explosive holy light and blue mana.

Having strengthened her body with both divine power and magic body strengthening, Olivia glared at Riverrier Lanze.

"Whether I die or you die, it will all end."

In this desperate coercion, Olivia chose to resist rather than accept or submit to it.

Because if she were to die, no one else would be sacrificed.

But before that, she would try to kill Riverrier Lanze, the mastermind behind this terrible situation. However, Riverrier Lanze remained calm in front of Olivia, who revealed her hostility.

"Do you think I didn't know you would make such a choice?"

At Riverrier Lanze's gesture, two knights appeared from somewhere in the corridor.

"…!"

"The moment you try anything foolish, you will witness Adriana's death."

"Senior…”

A miserable-looking Adriana was being dragged into the open by the knights. Olivia stared at Riverrier Lanze with wide eyes.

"You… vile…!"

"Even if you try something here, you'll only meet a miserable end, and you'll have to watch Adriana die first."

From the guilt on Adriana's face, it seemed she knew she was being used as bait for some purpose.

In the end, Olivia could not reach out. If Olivia tried anything, the sword pointed at Adriana's neck would do its job.

"First of all, I don't understand why you think this is such a bad thing. This is the first step in protecting the believers. It's about saving many people. If you just change your heart a little, you can save countless people."

Olivia could not respond to Riverrier Lanze's words.

No, she didn't.

The speaker believed in his words so sincerely that no argument would get through. He did not doubt himself because he believed the path he was taking was true justice.

Olivia knew Riverrier Lanze well.

That's the kind of person he was.

Always demanding something, but never being convinced.

"Senior… don't worry about me!"

"Adriana…"

The captive Adriana shouted at Olivia with a guilt-ridden expression.

Beyond her disappointment in everything, Adriana's expression was filled with disillusionment. Disappointed that what she had been striving for was nothing more than this, she had lost even the motivation to live.

"Senior… I'm fine. I am okay. Do as you wish…"

"Adriana! Don't say anything. I… I…"

I…

Olivia couldn't finish her sentence.

What should she do to save Adriana?

To save her, she must face them head-on.

She must pursue something she doesn't even want, whether it's from the Holy Empire or not.

Riverrier Lanze may become the captain of the Holy Knights again, but she must lie and say that all the cruel things he did to her were false.

Adriana is just the beginning.

Olivia calmly sorted her thoughts.

For now, listen to them.

After listening and making sure that Adriana is safely released…

Die.

If she dies, no one will torment her to change her mind, and he won't be able to torment anyone else either.

Her death will be the ultimate revenge against Riverrier Lanze. Those who want to use her will least want her death.

With that in mind, Olivia decided to accept his proposal for now.

Just then,

-Whoosh!

"Ugh!"

-Thud!

"Argh!"

Suddenly, something unexpected happened.

The necks of the two knights holding Adriana were abruptly severed.

In the midst of the sudden spray of blood, not only Olivia but also Riverrier Lanze's mouth gaped open.

From the darkness, a shadowy figure caught Adriana's body as the headless corpses thrashed about.

"Humans…”

The dark figure resembling a materialized shadow murmured, its red maw gaping in the darkness.

"How utterly wicked they are."

The sinister shape, more wicked than anything else in the world, smiled as it spoke of human wickedness.

-Swish!

"!"

As the black figure reached out, shadows wrapped around Olivia's entire body.

"What…?!"

"A demon…?"

The figure, with wings like a blood membrane woven from shadows, soared into the sky.

-Whoosh!

"Hehehehahahaha!"

With a laugh that tore through the night sky, the monster that snatched Adriana vanished into the heavens in an instant. Caught in the monster's trap too suddenly to resist, Olivia dangled helplessly in the night sky.

-Wha-what's going on?! Let me gooooo!

It was a frail, cute scream that didn't fit the grave and ominous atmosphere.

"What is that?!"

"It looks like a demon!"

"H-how could a demon be on the emperor's road…?!"

Riverrier Lanze cursed at the unidentified demonic monster that had suddenly abducted Olivia and Adriana, but no one knew its true identity.

But their bewilderment didn't last long.

An even more bewildering situation unfolded.

-Rumble!

The night sky was covered with dark clouds, and lightning flickered in the accumulated gloom.

-Flash!

In the blink of an eye, lightning began to pour down from the sky.

Harriet de saint-owan had summoned a lightning storm in her battle against Olivia Lanze.

Such a storm appeared and then dozens of bolts rained down.

Rumble!

“Ugh!”

“It's magic!”

Knights struck by the lightning activated their divine powers to protect themselves, but those who couldn't react in time were instantly charred black and crumbled to ashes.

The highest tier of destruction magic, Thunderstorm, had been cast.

“It's an attack from the demon race!”

The knights quickly assessed the situation and shouted, but things were not looking good.

The Thunderstorm wasn't the end of it.

Sizzle

A bizarre, warping sound echoed several times around the monastery, as if space itself was being distorted. Then, massive shockwaves erupted from the north, south, east, and west of the monastery.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Four consecutive explosions.

Explosions were cast four times in a row, causing the already devastated monastery to collapse and crumble.

Knights, priests, and paladins who were unable to use their powers strongly enough had already been shattered to pieces.

It was a massacre.

The knights began to experience hell due to the sudden onslaught of a high-ranking mage.

The sky rained lightning, and the monastery was blown away by the explosions.

And then.

Rumble

The ground shook violently as flames began to erupt from the surface.

From the sky, a rain of lightning.

From the ground, a storm of flames surged.

A Firestorm began to sweep across the land, as if to engulf everything in its path.

“This is…”

Riverrier Lanze watched as the lightning storm and the flames on the ground swallowed the knights whole.

In front of the headquarters of the Holy Knights, a sudden storm of flames had once erupted.

A dragon had appeared, and an unidentified Lycan had wreaked havoc.

Riverrier Lanze hadn't been in charge of the succubus escort at the time, but he had heard the reports and knew about it.

This felt like that time.

An unidentified demon race attack.

Amidst the sweeping flames, someone appeared, piercing through the fire and lightning.

Magic seemed to avoid that someone on its own, leaving that someone completely unaffected amidst the chaos.

A silver-maned wolf-like demon, a Lycan, stood there.

And beside it.

With hair that seemed to be aflame and a pair of curved horns protruding from its temples, it looked human but was something else entirely.

Roar!

In the midst of this hellish landscape, a Lycan and an unidentified demon appeared.

The demon stood within the wall of flames, carrying a pearly white sword with a blade that seemed to glow.

“Riverrier Lanze.”

The situation was a continuous string of incomprehensible astonishment.

With eyes widened in shock, Riverrier Lanze cried out, even as he was hit by the heat and lightning.

“Who are you?!”

"Me?"

The demon boy approaches, dragging his sword on the ground.

"My name is Valier."

"I am the enemy from the demon world."

"And the rightful heir to the Darklands."

The boy points his sword, which has a pearly white blade, at Riverrier Lanze.

Recognizing what the sword was, Riverrier Lanze's eyes widened in shock.

"Ho… w…?"

"Yo… u… Fallen clergy, scum."

From one to ten.

Riverrier Lanze couldn't understand a single thing about this situation.

"It's time for divine punishment."

But even if he couldn't understand it, the situation was unfolding.

The Demon King wielding the holy sword was trying to kill him.

CHAPTER 321

Humans needed to understand that the Demon War was not completely over.

Eleris understood what this meant, and Loyar didn't question it. Sarkegaar seemed to not know why it had to be this way, but he said nothing.

Lydia Schmitt would not be deployed in battle. There was a chance she might engage in fruitless activities, so she was left under Eleris's supervision.

The situation unfolded.

After confirming that Sarkegaar was taking Olivia and Adriana away, the plan commenced.

Once they were dropped off in a safe place, they might wonder why the demons had rescued them, but they would escape first.

The mysterious massacre that happened today would be reported as the work of the demons.

Sarkegaar had been told to fly around in his demonic form, for there needed to be witnesses for rumors to spread.

Of course, those present at the scene could not be witnesses.

Because they would all die.

In the monastery completely devastated by Eleris's magic, all the survivors were killed by these hellish destructive spells.

These destructive spells did not harm me or Loyar. The fact that such large-scale destructive magic could not harm someone was already proof that Eleris was an incredible magician.

Only Loyar and I were free within the heat that turned flesh into charcoal.

The survivors didn't even leave corpses behind, and those still alive had to fight in the extreme conditions of lightning storms and firestorms.

During the demon prisoner incident, Eleris had caused a firestorm but had no intention of killing anyone.

But this time, the magic was cast to annihilate all enemies.

The holy knights struggled to protect themselves with divine magic in the extreme heat.

But the remaining knights, including Riverrier Lanze, were elite holy knights.

- Roooooooar!

Loyar, transformed into a Lycan, fought to kill her opponents this time.

- Bang! Crash! Ka-boom!

He did not just push the holy knights back with his magically infused claws; he threw them, slammed them into the ground, grabbed them with both hands, and tore them apart.

- Crack!

- Aaaaaaaaargh!

Loyar bit off the head of a holy knight and pulled the body downward while lifting her mouth upward.

- Crunch!

- Guh…… urgh……

He roughly chewed the decapitated head of the holy knight.

Blood flowed from the silver beast's mouth, and a red frenzy flickered in his eyes.

Loyar.

I knew, but it was clear that Loyar's true nature was chilling.

But as long as he was strong, that was enough.

It was not a full moon, but it was close.

Both Eleris and Loyar would be at their peak.

"Huff!"

- Crash!

I stepped back a few paces as I parried Riverrier Lanze's greatsword.

Among the elite holy knights, he was the core of this incident and an enemy that had to be killed.

Riverrier Lanze.

I was facing him.

"How can the Demon King wield Tiamata?"

"Because it is the will of the gods."

Facing him was not a wise choice to begin with.

However, I stood before Riverrier Lanze. My words about the will of the gods twisted Riverrier Lanze's expression.

"How dare a demon like you discuss the divine?"

"You, on the other hand, deny the divine power?"

"Silence, young Demon King! I don't know how you found it, but I won't tolerate any further insults to the gods!"

Riverrier Lanze charged at me, wielding a greatsword.

The ex-commander of the Holy Knights, a veteran among veterans.

"Heugh!"

-Kwang!

Even if I strengthen my body with Magic Body Strengthening, it's impossible for me to fight such an experienced warrior.

After clashing swords just once, I rolled back, feeling as if my whole body would crumble from the impact.

"How pathetic, are you really the Demon King?"

Riverrier Lanze mainly focused on defending himself.

Yet, I was overwhelmingly outmatched.

Naturally.

Even so, I stood before Riverrier Lanze.

I had to stand before him.

I had to face the one who kidnapped Adriana, couldn't let go of his obsession with Olivia, and engaged in such despicable acts.

I could draw upon my true anger.

-Uuwoong

"If this isn't the power of the gods, then what is?"

It's because I can draw upon the true power of Tiamata.

"To use… divine power… how could a demon…"

I clearly saw the shock and disgust in Riverrier Lanze's eyes.

-Flash!

Divine light exploded and enveloped my body.

Physical enhancement through divine power followed my Magic Body Strengthening. Olivia Lanze's power filled me.

-Kwakang!

A fierce shockwave was created as the greatsword and Tiamata collided.

The white light that dwelled in Riverrier Lanze's sword. Although he wasn't a Sword Master, he wasn't much different from one. I would be overwhelmingly defeated in a hundred battles at my current level.

However, Riverrier Lanze couldn't focus solely on our battle.

He was fighting within a furnace that could turn iron scraps into molten iron.

And I had Magic Body Strengthening, self-suggestion, and Tiamata's divine power.

On top of that, word magic.

"Die!"

-Zzaaang!

"Kuh!"

Riverrier Lanze, who retreated from my sword strike, looked incredulous.

Even though he thought of me as a mere novice despite being the Demon King's successor, he couldn't understand his own retreat.

I felt the same way.

My word magic level was too weak to draw out any significant power.

"Do not discuss the gods any further, young Demon King."

Cold fury filled Riverrier Lanze's eyes.

He might not understand the situation, but it seemed that he was gradually focusing solely on this fight. Riverrier Lanze's divine power was overwhelming.

"Fine, whatever you may be. I must kill you before you become an even more dangerous seed of evil."

-Kuruung!

The white light within Riverrier Lanze's body erupts explosively.

The divine power of Tu'an is most potent against impure beings; in other words, it has the power of exorcism.

But I am not a demon. Therefore, I am unaffected by the exorcising power that dwells within the sacred power of Tu'an.

-Crack!

"Urgh!"

However, the same applies to me.

Both the output of my Magic Body Strengthening and the output of the divine power I wield through Tiamata are overshadowed by Riverrier Lanze.

Had it not been for this situation, I wouldn't have been able to cross swords with Riverrier Lanze even a few times. Riverrier Lanze approaches me like a giant.

"If you had survived, you would have quietly spent the rest of your life trapped in the cramped walls of Darkland. You're chasing the glory of the past, hastening your demise."

Riverrier Lanze looks at me as if I were a helpless child.

There are powerful magicians and Lycan, but it seemed he had already realized that the power I possess is not that strong.

This is a battle of generals.

However, Riverrier Lanze is the strongest paladin among his forces, and although I am a general, I am weaker than my subordinates.

Thus, my participation in the battle of generals is merely a formality.

Although I can draw upon the power of Tiamata, I am gradually pushed back.

Riverrier Lanze strikes with a stern expression, blow after blow.

"Yes, I don't need an organization like this. You've appeared at the right time. If I kill you, the cause of the next Demon War, and recover the Sacred Relic of Tu'an, I won't need such petty work."

-Clang!

"Kuh!"

With just a single clash of our swords, I had no choice but to be thrown back, almost rolling on the ground.

I could read a sense of ecstasy in Riverrier Lanze's stern expression and gaze.

"Is this the revelation of Tu'an bestowed upon me?"

He interprets the situation, where the Demon King wields the sacred sword, in his own way.

Regardless of the cause, he believes he is in a position to claim both the honor of slaying the next Demon King and recovering the Sacred Relic of Tu'an.

It seems he thinks me appearing with the sacred sword of Tu'an is like a pig carrying money entering his home.

Now that I've appeared, does he think Olivia is no longer needed?

Does he think Tu'an has brought him both the Sacred Relic and the neck of the young Demon King?

-Thunk!

"!"

I couldn't repel the heavily piercing black sword with my own.

It was inevitable that Riverrier Lanze would be mistaken. After all, I am not in a

situation where I can confront him now.

-Clang!

"Ugh!"

It was difficult to even parry his sword, so there were several instances when I couldn't help but be exposed. Although the Magic Body Strengthening and protection prevented the sword from directly injuring my body, I could still feel the heavy impact.

It was a struggle to regain my senses, as if I had been struck in a vital spot with a hammer.

Riverrier Lanze's fierce attacks continued several more times, and maintaining my Magic Body Strengthening was becoming increasingly difficult.

My opponent was incomparably strong.

That much was an immutable fact.

Bang! Bang! Clash!

"Ugh!"

I wasn't unaware that this was a futile effort. Even if he were to confront Loyar, who was currently slaughtering the Holy Knights, I had no idea what the outcome would be.

However, I wasn't fighting alone.

Crash! Flash!

"Guh!"

In an instant, four consecutive bolts of Thunder Storm struck Riverrier Lanze's body, causing him to narrow his eyes and retreat a few steps.

I wasn't alone. Eleris had been buying me time by casting large-scale destructive magic, preventing Riverrier Lanze from landing a decisive blow on me.

However, the lightning that should have reduced an ordinary person to ashes only managed to slow down Riverrier Lanze's steps.

Crash! Roar!

"You may not be much to look at, but it seems you have some useful underlings!"

I didn't particularly feel the need to refute that statement.

Riverrier Lanze, who was approaching me steadfastly, no longer appeared human in my eyes.

Was this the true power of the Holy Knights?

Could I really call that thing a human? Rather, didn't it seem more monstrous than me, the Demon King?

By now.

It must be happening.

Even if I went back now, it would be too late.

Brandishing the roaring Tiamata, I parried Riverrier Lanze's descending greatsword from below, thrusting it upward.

"Get lost!"

Swoosh!

With a resounding noise, Riverrier Lanze's chest swelled up, and I thrust Tiamata into it.

Flash!

Boom!

The moment my thrust landed, I felt a heavy backlash, and Riverrier Lanze and I were flung in opposite directions.

"What are you?"

Riverrier Lanze's expression hardened. It was as if he sensed I was using an extraordinary power.

"I'm the Demon King."

Tiamata wailed.

It was reacting to my anger.

My anger wasn't for any other reason.

"Because of you…"

I aimed Tiamata at him.

"I couldn't go to Miss Temple's."

"…What?"

It wasn't a matter of needing talent.

I wasn't angry about missing that.

When she said she needed one more vote.

I was unable to provide that vote.

I had worried about who to choose if I went to the contest.

But the need to worry about that had vanished.

Riverrier Lanze didn't understand what I was talking about.

Rumble!

In the midst of the fiery storm of thunder, I thought about it.

What would Ellen be thinking now?

Without me there, would she resent me?

She had asked me to come no matter what.

Even though she wasn't the type to say that, she had said it.

Words like "I had no choice" held no meaning.

Nothing could be resolved with the excuse of "I had no choice." That would only accumulate into resentment and sadness.

But I couldn't help but come here.

In the end, I couldn't leave those who were in danger because of me to fend for themselves.

I had once again created an unavoidable situation, causing someone grief.

The vile malice was infuriating.

Towards the one who created this situation.

"Then just die."

I was furious.

And so, the fury was justified.

Uuuuuung!

"I can't understand what you're saying. But there's no need to converse with you any longer."

Kkurrung!

With a powerful stride, he approached me step by step, and swung his sword, enveloped in divine power.

It was dangerous.

With a strong sense of impending doom, I leaped to the side.

Kwadududuk!

I managed to avoid it, but the ground where the sword of Riverrier Lanze struck was gouged out as if it had been devoured by a giant beast.

It was a shield that wouldn't break, and it could unleash torrents of powerful physical force.

Riverrier Lanze was, in the end, a formidable figure in his field.

If it weren't for the support of magic, simply crossing swords with him would have turned me into a pool of blood.

"Do you only know how to run away?"

"Yeah, if I stall for time, even your zombie-like vitality will come to an end."

"How dare you compare such a vile and repulsive being to this divine power!"

To treat him like an undead was the greatest insult to a paladin who served the divine Tu’an.

Kwooooooooooo!

The battle cry of Loyar echoed from a distance, piercing through the cacophony.

Once more, the flame-engulfed Riverrier Lanze charged at me.

Again, he aimed his sword, wrapped in a torrent of divine power, at me.

"Ugh!"

Riverrier Lanze was a paladin.

He fought with overwhelming defense as his weapon, barely paying attention to his own defense, and focused on delivering a heavy blow in one strike.

He certainly could do that. It would be nothing more than a tickle to him if he could

demonstrate such skills in the midst of such high-level destructive magic.

Riverrier Lanze's attack approached once again. The distance between him and me was about twenty paces. Standing in place, he aimed his sword at me and focused the divine power on it.

He wasn't getting closer. It was as if he didn't need to.

From twenty paces away,

He swung his sword at me.

If I didn't dodge, I would die.

Whooong!

As my vision turned white, the torrent of divine power, possessing physical force, covered the spot where I had been just a moment ago.

"Kuh!"

I had dodged, but a little too late. Part of my left shoulder was literally torn away, and an intense, burning pain rushed through the wound.

Tiamata's gushing divine power was sealing the wound, but almost half of my shoulder was gone.

I could endure the pain, but I couldn't use my left arm.

This was insane.

This had long surpassed the realm of swordsmanship.

Just as Saviolin Turner added an aura to his sword and used a magic shockwave, Riverrier Lanze could strike from any distance beyond the reach of his sword, like a deranged divine power launcher.

At the pinnacle of their abilities, swordsmen could perform bizarre acts indistinguishable from magic. The worst part was that my current opponent was one such swordsman.

"Has your spirit broken, Demon King?"

The power of Riverrier Lanze was incomparable to mine. Eleris did her best to support me from a distance with her magic, but Riverrier Lanze's defenses were still formidable.

Loyar was being attacked by five or more holy knights, so she had no opportunity to worry about me.

I felt a wall.

It was a different feeling from the wall I felt when facing Ellen.

Not an unreachable sensation, but rather, the wall of death seemed to gradually approach.

What should I have done?

Should I have waited for Adriana to die, or for Olivia to fall to this man?

Should I have stood idly by as the empire's fragmentation drew ever closer?

I knew that standing before an enemy I could never match was reckless.

Was I supposed to just watch someone die and be sacrificed?

I knew that not everyone could be happy.

But understanding that and accepting it are different matters, so I stood before Riverrier Lanze in my true form.

I believed it was the only thing I could do.

The pain in my shoulder gradually subsided, but Riverrier Lanze once again placed his sword on his shoulder and began to imbue it with divine power.

At my level, I couldn't block that divine energy.

I didn't know if I could avoid an attack that would reach me just by piercing a wide area.

I had survived being hit in the shoulder, but if that struck my head, heart, or severed my body…

I would die.

And that wasn't all.

Loyar couldn't handle all the holy knights.

"Captain! I'll join you!"

One of the holy knights who had escaped Loyar's onslaught was running towards Riverrier Lanze.

Riverrier Lanze looked back at the fast-approaching knight and shouted,

"Just tie him up for a moment! Go, Rondel!"

"Yes!"

If I faced Riverrier Lanze and more opponents, it would truly be the end. If that holy knight could hold me for just a moment, I wouldn't be able to block Riverrier Lanze's strike.

The moment the holy knight, who had begun to join from a distance, brushed past Riverrier Lanze and charged towards me—

"Puhak!"

"Ugh… ugh!"

I watched in horror as the knight's dark, sharpened fingernails pierced through Riverrier Lanze's back and burst out through his chest.

The holy knight cried out.

"Your Highness! This one has arrived!"

It wasn't a holy knight; it was Sarkegaar.

CHAPTER 322

Sarkegaar joined the battlefield, transforming into the appearance of one of the Holy Knights. He pretended to join forces with Riverrier Lanze and stabbed him in the back.

The strike pierced right through his heart.

It was a fatal wound.

However, I witnessed an even more horrifying spectacle that followed.

"Gah… Huff!"

-Crack!

Riverrier Lanze, grasping the situation, repelled Sarkegaar with his divine power. Sarkegaar, who was at a disadvantage against divine power compared to me, was flung far away, panting as he slowly got back up.

Riverrier Lanze clutched at his own heart, crimson blood gushing out.

-Woosh

The wound began to heal.

Whether his shattered heart had regenerated or not, Riverrier Lanze was coming back to life, even as blood trickled down the corners of his mouth.

"Insane… Are you even human?"

"Your Majesty, what are you talking about?" Cried Sarkegaar.

Riverrier Lanze wiped the blood from his mouth with an expression as cold as steel.

"This is what it means to be human."

Having repaired his broken heart and prepared for battle once again, Riverrier Lanze looked at me and spoke.

"God accepts my faith and makes the impossible possible. This is something only humans can do. It is possible because God loves humans."

Riverrier Lanze seemed to think that divine power was a privilege exclusive to humans.

"So, it is my mission and duty to reclaim the sacred artifact from an unholy existence like you as soon as possible. And it is the way to repay God's love."

Riverrier Lanze's fanaticism differed from that of Lydia.

Lydia Schmitt's fanaticism was intense, but Riverrier Lanze's was a refined madness.

A cold fanaticism devoid of excitement, impatience, or anger, carefully chiseled and forged. Riverrier Lanze looked at Sarkegaar, who had been swept away by the torrent of divine power and was now disguised as a Holy Knight once again.

"An existence that wears the skin of another being, what a despicable minion you are."

"…"

I had expected Riverrier Lanze to be extraordinarily strong.

But I never imagined it would be to this extent. He recovered even after his heart was pierced. Unless his head was severed, he seemed to be an unkillable creature.

Now, I even doubted whether it was possible to exhaust his stamina amidst the pouring lightning.

At this rate, should Loyar and even Sarkegaar join forces with me? Is that the only viable option?

The dreadfulness of the Holy Knights.

I experienced it in the worst possible way.

They enhance their bodies, protect themselves with divine power, shoot divine power from their swords, and even recover from near-fatal injuries.

If that's not a zombie, then what is?

Not all Holy Knights would be like this, but Riverrier Lanze was the pinnacle of those who met all the aforementioned conditions.

Riverrier Lanze began to attack Sarkegaar and me once again.

-Boom! Crash! Bang!

"Kruut!"

The monster before us was none other than Riverrier Lanze.

As if we didn't know what to do in the face of the rampaging beast's explosive attack, we were only focused on dodging his fierce assaults.

Tchak!

Sarkegaar's attack was capable of penetrating his defenses, but Riverrier Lanze wouldn't allow any surprise assaults.

The black blade-like weapon Sarkegaar created by transforming part of his body could indeed penetrate Riverrier Lanze's defenses.

However, even if the attack succeeded by chance, nothing would change.

Uuuung!

It absolutely wouldn't allow a fatal wound, and even if he was injured, he would recover in no time.

We couldn't even begin to fathom the limits of that creature's divine power.

Our only chance of victory lay in a war of attrition, but whether or not I could survive Riverrier Lanze's attacks until then was uncertain.

"Your Highness! You must also consider retreating!"

Sarkegaar's cry caught my ear.

Yes.

I could put an end to this chaos and retreat. I was well aware that it was time to consider that option.

I had succeeded in rescuing Olivia and Adriana, and I had done so in the name of Valier.

But as a result, Adriana and Olivia would be in danger again.

In the end, there would undoubtedly be those who suspected that the demons had saved Adriana and Olivia. Even if the two were innocent, people's misunderstandings and suspicions could lead to even worse outcomes.

Or perhaps Riverrier Lanze would turn a blind eye to this fact and try to manipulate Olivia once again.

If I couldn't kill Riverrier Lanze here and now, today's actions would be worse than doing nothing at all.

"No, either this bastard dies or I die today. One of us has to die."

So, I won't back down.

"Do you think you have a chance? Demon King."

Riverrier Lanze looked at me with cautious eyes.

"Yes. I won't die here. I'll kill you and survive."

"On what basis are you so sure?"

Riverrier Lanze had faith, and so did I.

"Just because. That's how it's meant to be in this world."

A miracle that always happens for my sake will happen again this time.

Of course.

Self-suggestion?

Suggestion?

I don't know about that.

But this is just the truth, beyond belief or disbelief.

My second life is punishment.

There's no way my given punishment would end by just dying here at the hands of Riverrier Lanze.

There's more.

A bigger punishment awaits me.

There's more I have to endure.

There's more sorrow and pain I have to experience.

If I die like this, if a miracle doesn't happen.

I'll be disappointed that my punishment was nothing more than this.

"There's just too much prepared for me before I die."

I won't be killed before I taste all of it.

Though I may collapse, be trampled, go mad, or die amidst it all.

Even if I can seize happiness by breaking through everything,

I am not yet in that place.

"Even if the Five Great Gods descend upon this place to kill me, I won't die. Riverrier Lanze."

This is neither faith nor a hint, but simply a fact. With that level of conviction, a different light shone in Riverrier Lanze's eyes than before.

"You have crossed the line of blasphemy, Demon King."

Contempt.

Fanaticism faces another fanaticism and feels contempt. Now, he feels the same thing towards me as I do towards him.

I will not die until the prepared stage is fully set.

I will make sure that Olivia is no longer forced to suffer.

I will not let Olivia, shackled by the yoke of a saint, return to a life where she cannot even wonder who she truly is.

For Adriana, and for Olivia as well.

I will show them what it means to be truly saved from the pit of gods, faith, and belief.

Though all places where humans live, all realms where humans exist, may be slums for their own reasons, I will make them realize that slums are not the only things that exist.

I will give both of them the gift of freedom.

I will let them live a life of contemplation and choice, not adapting and submitting to what is forced upon them, but choosing at the end of their own struggles.

Adriana, Olivia.

I have decided to give them true freedom in every sense of the word.

"I will."

"Kill."

"You."

I make a more chilling vow than any I have made so far.

Riverrier Lanze clenches his sword at my words.

He doesn't say anything like it being impossible.

He seemed to feel that something had changed in my demeanor.

Let it happen again.

Miracle.

Come to me.

Don't I still have many things I want?

Because I have many things to go through.

Isn't that why you're sending me up, to bring me down?

I haven't gone all the way up yet.

A miracle that allows me to take the life of Riverrier Lanze, an enemy I can never stand against at my current level.

I want it.

I prepare for the miracle.

Rage.

Burning the fuel called rage to generate the result called a miracle.

I must be angry.

My will has always backed me up whenever I have to surpass my actual limits.

Riverrier Lanze despises me. As if he no longer wants to even speak to me, he prepares for another attack.

"Die, Demon King!"

-Karddruk!

With one stroke of Riverrier Lanze's sword, an explosive shockwave distorted the ground. I narrowly avoided a direct hit but had to roll several times on the ground. Sarkegaar was casting a spell, but it only left small scratches; the iron wall called Riverrier Lanze was solid.

An iron wall that collapses and rebuilds itself.

Blue and white light begins to concentrate in his sword.

An explosive release of magic and divine power. As Saviolin Turner showed, it's not just magicians who can launch area attacks. He was about to strike me down in one blow and leave this area.

He prepares a powerful blow.

Tiamata may be the source of my sacred power, but I cannot draw upon it from within myself.

I can only harness the power of Tiamata under specific conditions.

Riverrier Lanze, the Holy Knight of Tu'an.

Tiamata, the sacred relic of Tu'an.

In the end, we both use the same kind of power, and I am at a disadvantage.

Simply put, it's a battle of equal forces. Thus, as long as we use the same kind of power, I will inevitably lose in a battle of output.

Whether he is a fallen priest or a crazed fanatic, the time and experience he has accumulated cannot be fake.

"Disappear with the light."

That is what a war hero, who returned victorious from the Great Demon War, would say.

I must surpass the genuine time he has built up.

He's a madman who won't die unless it's a fatal blow that severs his neck.

Then, in the end, I must rely on my own power.

Anger.

And.

Faith (self-suggestion) and words (word magic).

And the fate that will be given to me.

Since it hasn't arrived yet, I will not die.

The miracle that can kill this monster.

I know what it is.

Facing him as he prepares for a powerful attack, I grasp Tiamata with both hands.

It is impossible to infuse power while holding it, but.

I speak.

With determination and anger.

"Tiamata."

As he strikes down with a powerful blow, and the storm of divine power with physical force tries to swallow me up.

I command Tiamata, releasing the boiling divine power in all directions.

"Become a demon sword."

-Krrrrrng!

"!"

The white light that boiled from Tiamata turned into darkness that incinerates light.

Naturally, to kill the monster that regenerates infinitely with the power of Tu'an.

All too obviously.

The power of the opposite extreme is needed.

-Krrrrrrrrrng!

It's not over with just incineration. In the midst of the waves of light pouring down upon me, I penetrate the waves, cloaked in darkness.

"You…! What have you done to Tiamata?!"

I charge towards Riverrier Lanze's astonished outcry.

My plan was correct.

I couldn't defeat Riverrier Lanze with the same power. So, I summoned the power of the opposite extreme and penetrated through it.

With this contrasting power, I can break through his ironclad defense and cut off his breath.

It's a single opportunity.

I cut off his breath before he grasps the situation.

As I break through the pouring light.

Cloaked in darkness that light cannot penetrate, I instantly reach Riverrier Lanze, who is in shock.

In just one moment, life and death are twisted, and history is reversed. I know this.

The line between life and death is ultimately a matter of moments.

Retreat.

[Using 1,000 achievement points.]

And then.

Clad in the power of the demon, I shout at Riverrier Lanze, who retracts his greatsword and tries to stab me in response.

Word magic.

"Stop!"

"Kuh! This… this is…!"

One step.

One inch.

Life and death can be determined by such small differences.

Bound by my spell, Riverrier Lanze's movements were momentarily restricted.

Whoosh!

"Guh… Ugh!"

I succeeded in plunging the demon sword Tiamata into his heart.

I had transformed Tiamata into a demon sword.

That was the miracle I had wished for.

Using the power of my word magic, I strengthened the spell and managed to halt Riverrier Lanze's movements at the crucial moment.

As a result, Riverrier Lanze was dealt a fatal blow.

This time, it truly was a fatal wound.

"Ku, Kuh… Kuh!"

He clutched at the demon sword Tiamata embedded in his heart, but could only spit out blood.

The Holy Knights were already weakening as time passed. Having reached their limits, they began to flee as they witnessed Riverrier Lanze on his knees with his heart pierced.

They must have thought it better to survive and report this situation than to prolong a lost battle.

"Kuh… Kuh… Kuh…”

"Persistent, aren't you?"

Even after his heart was penetrated by the demon sword, Riverrier Lanze did not die easily.

From the swirling white lights surrounding his body, it was clear that he was clinging to life using his divine power.

Despite being hit directly with the power of my word magic, he could still use his innate power, albeit weakly.

I hadn't anticipated that he would be such a monstrous opponent.

"Ho… w… Tia… Tiamata… How…”

However, he must have reached his limit, as he struggled to fight off the corrosive power of the demonic energy coursing through his body.

Although born from the same existence, the power of my word magic was too great.

Riverrier Lanze might have survived Sarkegaar's attack, but he could not withstand the corrupting power flowing through the demon sword Tiamata.

He was merely clinging to life with his last desperate breath.

I simply looked down at Riverrier Lanze, who had fallen to his knees, trying to

remove the demon sword from his heart but unable to move even a fingertip.

As I watched Riverrier Lanze's last moments, Loyar, in the form of Lycan, approached me.

"Your Majesty, I shall pursue the fleeing Holy Knights."

"Good. Go with Sarkegaar."

Sarkegaar was also shocked to see me transform the divine sword into a demon sword and fight, but he didn't forget what needed to be done right now.

"Don't let a single one escape. No one must know that I wielded Tiamata."

"Yes."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

To be precise, Olivia shouldn't have seen the Demon King wielding the divine sword. Sarkegaar must have taken her far away. It was unlikely that Olivia saw what happened here.

"You… Who are you…?"

Riverrier Lanze murmured through the blood spilling from his mouth.

"The Demon King."

"Why did you… No… Why did you attack us…? You… Why did you save Olivia…?"

Facing death, Riverrier Lanze seemed to finally have doubts.

He wondered why the self-proclaimed Demon King had saved Olivia and Adriana. What was the story behind Miss Temple?

He spoke in a dying voice.

"Let's… cooperate… Demon Lord…"

"What did you say?"

Riverrier Lanze whispered in his dying voice.

"You… desire the reconstruction of the demon world… don't you? If so… the division of the empire… would be helpful to you… If we cooperate… a common goal… would be an irresistible offer… for you as well…"

It was impossible not to be astonished by his words.

"You should have said that earlier."

To discuss such a humiliating compromise only when faced with death.

"It's like you're begging for your life."

"You'll… need me… as well…"

If he had said this while in his right mind, it might have seemed like fanaticism, as if he would betray humanity for the sake of the Holy Empire.

But now, with his life hanging by a thread, Riverrier Lanze's words were nothing more than a desperate struggle.

He had laid everything bare in the face of imminent death.

"Firstly, it's not pure to beg for your life from the enemy when you're at the brink of death."

"It's not about not choosing the means for the purpose, but the fact that the means change depending on the situation shows that your intentions aren't pure either."

"Riverrier Lanze, you're disqualified to serve the Divine Tu'an in too many ways."

At my words, Riverrier Lanze stared at me with dying eyes.

"Do you really… think you're the champion Tu'an…?"

"Well, do you think otherwise?"

Riverrier Lanze struggled to look up at me.

He stared into my eyes.

"Is that… so…?"

As if trying to find something he had lost in my eyes.

"Yes… the champion of Tu'an was originally… an existence that punished humans."

Champion of Tu'an.

They were originally human hunters, not demons or undead.

They had been responsible for hunting down corrupt dark mages and heretics for generations, and my predecessor, the last champion of Tu'an, had been killed in battle with heretics.

The champion of Tu'an was originally one who killed humans, not demons or the undead.

"It may not be… so strange… that the Demon King is the champion of Tu'an… after all…"

He looked up at me.

Only when faced with death did he accept that I was the champion of Tu'an.

Did he accept everything due to his own defeat? Did he think his defeat was the will of Tu'an?

God is right.

Thus, I am facing death because God has abandoned me.

So, I am wrong.

His fanaticism remained steadfast even in the face of death.

Even Tiamata, transformed into a demon sword, seemed to have no choice but to accept it in the face of death.

If Tu’an was truly on his side, he wouldn't have been defeated.

In the end, he had to admit that I could only be the champion of Tu’an, above all his doubts.

I pulled the Tiamata embedded in his heart and pointed it at the kneeling Riverrier Lanze's throat.

He spoke.

"I believed… I was pure."

It seemed like an excuse, but it was not.

The champion of Tu'an, wielding Tiamata, had come to kill a paladin who served the Goddess of Purity.

Therefore, he believed himself to be pure, leaving behind a final excuse.

He could have truly been pure.

He could have believed that the justice he followed was the right path.

That's why he left his excuse as his last testament.

Slash!

With a downward stroke of Tiamata, I severed Riverrier Lanze's life completely.

The life of a corrupted priest was taken by a corrupted relic.

In the end, Riverrier Lanze fell twice to the same person.

I stood blankly in the ruined, burnt-out monastery.

It was a place where the world had trembled and chaos had ensued.

But now, only the ashes of the fire, the rising smoke, and the pale moonlight of winter shone upon the world.

Ignoring the headless corpse of the former Commander of the Holy Knights and the rolling head, I looked up at the sky blankly.

In the end, I couldn't go where I needed to be.

What should I say?

That I couldn't be there because of another unavoidable situation.

What would Ellen say?

No, do I even have the right to say such a thing?

I planned and succeeded in the incredible feat of annihilating the secret religious organization and the former Commander of the Holy Knights to prevent the empire's division.

I pondered what excuse I should give to Ellen.

This situation should have been absurd, but it didn't feel that way at all.

"…"

Beneath the winter night sky, a message appeared before my eyes.

[Special Achievement Unlocked - Turning Point of History]

[The death of a major character who should have existed in the original worldline (Riverrier Lanze) has been confirmed.]

A turning point in history caused by killing someone.

This was the first time.

[As a reward for the special achievement, you have acquired the 'Apostle' trait.]

Trait: Apostle

Description: You have become the true master of Tiamata.

It was simple.

But I felt like I knew what it meant.

As a demon sword, Tiamata; as a divine sword, Tiamata.

For the first time in history, I became the true champion of Tu'an, capable of wielding both.

Deep in the night.

The still feverish atmosphere of the Miss & Mister Temple contest venue was filled with thunderous cheers.

The long contest had come to an end, and only the announcement of the winners remained.

Sparkling pollen scattered from the ceiling of the hall.

Olivia Lanze, who had been a strong contender for the win, did not participate.

Her reason for not attending was unknown.

“This year's Miss Temple is a first-year student of the Royal Class! Congratulations to Ellen!”

However, Ellen triumphed over the fierce competition and was gloriously crowned this year's Miss Temple.

Amidst the applause and cheers of the crowd, a crown and bouquet were presented to Ellen, who was wearing a white dress.

The fellow students of the Royal Class were also applauding and congratulating Ellen.

However, Ellen's expression was frozen as she held the glorious crown and bouquet that signified her victory. She simply stared blankly downwards.

Ellen, who needed just one vote, received a large number of votes.

Excluding that single vote, she received the majority of the votes.

Despite being chosen by numerous people,

Ellen couldn't shake the feeling that the world had abandoned her.

CHAPTER 323

"Senior, what on earth… What's going on?"

"I don't know either. The important thing is, we can't get involved in that mess."

Olivia and Adriana were making their way through the forest. Olivia was leading, holding tightly onto Adriana's hand in case they got separated.

The situation had already been dire, but when an unexpected demon-like creature kidnapped Adriana, it became even more critical.

When that demon captured Olivia as well, her heart sank.

As they were being abducted, hanging in mid-air, Olivia hesitated to use her divine power. She didn't know what might happen to herself, but she feared Adriana could fall.

And then.

When the demon unceremoniously dropped them off in a distant forest and just left, they couldn't help but be stunned.

They had expected some kind of treacherous ordeal or a threat to their lives.

But the demon released Adriana and Olivia without a word, and then soared away somewhere, its massive black wings flapping.

Olivia had been wracking her brain on how to confront this never-before-seen demon, but there hadn't even been a chance to fight.

She had considered drawing Tiamata, but that moment never came.

When a thunderstorm rolled in from afar, lightning flashing and a crimson firestorm surging, they knew chaos had truly erupted.

Though Olivia desperately wanted to investigate what was happening, she didn't

head in that direction solely because of Adriana.

The situation was unclear, but securing Adriana's safety was the priority.

That's why Olivia was diligently walking away from the scene.

Adriana also found the situation incomprehensible.

"Listen well, Adriana."

"Yes, Senior."

"Whatever happened to us, you must not tell anyone."

"Yes."

Adriana understood why Olivia was saying this.

"We don't know what this is, but if someone finds out, it will definitely not end well."

“…Yes."

Given the circumstances, even if it was a remote area of the empire, a large-scale investigation into the chaos that had unfolded there would soon be inevitable.

What's worse, the demon had rescued them for reasons they couldn't understand. If this came to light, they might not be treated well, or worse, they could be accused of colluding with the demon.

Furthermore, only the death of all the knights in that place would ensure the validity of their silence.

Olivia didn't know what was happening.

However.

They had to get out of this place.

Olivia continued walking, holding Adriana's hand tightly.

It had been quite a commotion, so there was bound to be chaos, and it was certain that forces would be dispatched for investigation.

"Did you take care of everything?"

"Yes."

That's why we regrouped at a location far away from the abandoned monastery.

I, Sarkegaar, Loyar, Eleris. And the trembling Lydia Schmitt. Lydia Schmitt hadn't fully grasped the situation.

However, she had seen the demons flying through the night sky, the Lord Vampire unleashing large-scale destructive magic, and even the silver beast Loyar.

She had witnessed the four of us slaughter the elite Holy Knights of the Riverrier Lanze, including Lanze himself.

It would have been an impossible battle if they had been in their best condition and fully prepared.

Originally, I would not have been a match for Riverrier Lanze. He should not have fought in a place where the most destructive magic, capable of turning a person to ashes in an instant, was unfolding. But he lost his life due to an unexpected variable, the demon sword Tiamata.

Strictly speaking, this was a stroke of luck created by Tiamata's demonic power, not a tremendous increase in my strength.

Yet, the fact remains that I fought Riverrier Lanze and killed him.

The fleeing Holy Knights were all dealt with by Loyar and Sarkegaar.

"You… Who… Who are you…?"

In this inexplicable situation, Lydia Schmitt could only see my subordinates and me as the unfathomable rulers of the demon world.

Therefore, it was time to decide the fate of the terrified Lydia Schmitt.

The information I needed was the whereabouts of Riverrier Lanze, which I had obtained and resolved the incident.

Now, Lydia Schmitt was no longer useful. I stared at the terrified Lydia Schmitt.

The other three hadn't addressed me as "your highness," so Lydia Schmitt still didn't know my true identity.

However, she must have some idea since I controlled demons.

The re-emerged Demon King.

I couldn't simply let Lydia Schmitt go.

She knew too much that she shouldn't.

Kill her or turn her into a vampire.

I had to choose one of the two options.

"Your Highness."

Eleris called out to me quietly.

"May I take care of this child?"

"You want to take responsibility?"

Eleris doesn't like killing.

But today, Eleris had repeatedly unleashed large-scale destructive magic at my command.

Although Loyar had killed the elites, those without the power to protect themselves had been slaughtered by Eleris.

Her expression wasn't great because of that.

She hadn't argued against my orders and had obediently carried them out.

But she couldn't help feeling tormented.

It seemed she wanted to avoid any further killing if possible.

"I will take responsibility and make her harmless to us."

"!"

The one who gasped at her words was Lydia.

"P-please… Please… Please. Kill… Kill me, please…"

Lydia collapsed to her knees, sobbing and curling up. Eleris looked at her with a somber expression.

"It doesn't mean that I'll create one within my power."

"Then… what exactly?"

"We'll have to figure that out as we go."

It seemed that Eleris was trying to find a better solution than where she had to kill Lydia or turn her into a vampire.

"Fine. I trust you."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

Eleris forcibly lifted the trembling Lydia. Neither Loyar nor Sarkegaar had anything to say to Eleris.

If it were Eleris, she would find a way not to kill Lydia.

At least it would be better than leaving it to Loyar and Sarkegaar.

Above all, Lydia Schmitt was a powerful elite knight who remained here. If she could become an ally under their control, it wouldn't be bad.

We returned to the main road through Eleris's mass teleport.

Eleris was holding onto Lydia Schmitt. Lydia's face was pale with fear of what might happen to her, but she couldn't bring herself to resist.

The fanatics were gone, and only a person trembling with fear of being turned into a vampire remained.

What was Eleris planning to do with Lydia?

She wasn't sure, but it seemed Eleris always had a way. It would be checked later how this issue was handled.

Leaving the two in Eleris's basement room, Loyar, Sarkegaar, and I went out to the street.

"Your Highness, why is it necessary for us that the Empire knows about our existence?"

Sarkegaar finally brought up the question he had been holding back.

"I think the sense of crisis will unite humanity, and that unity will not be good for us at all."

A valid question.

"I think so too," said Loyar, who had been silent.

Although they did what they were told, they couldn't help but have doubts. They had mentioned Tiamata while sharing recent news, but they didn't question it.

"I have a plan. I'll explain it soon, so please wait."

"…"

"…"

"I'm a bit busy right now."

Sarkegaar closed his mouth as if he understood, and it seemed Loyar stopped caring.

If I thought hard, I would have an excuse. I could somehow convince them, but there was no time to devote to such things now.

"Let's go."

The only thought was to return to the temple quickly.

The time was already close to midnight.

The official events of the festival had all ended on Friday.

The winner of the Miss Temple Contest was Ellen.

Unfortunately, the winner of the Mister Temple Contest was not Clifman. However, Clifman had received many votes from the female seniors who were intoxicated by his clumsy charm on stage, and he managed to come in third place.

There was even a parade led by Miss & Mister Temple after the contest.

Ellen didn't know about such things, but it was fine either way.

During the main event and the parade, Reinhardt didn't show himself.

With the help of Liana, Ellen changed her clothes.

"Something must have happened."

"…"

Liana blurted that out without hesitation. She wasn't so stupid as to not understand what she meant. Ellen understood her words too.

For some reason, many of her classmates who congratulated her looked at her with pity.

Ellen knew why they looked at her that way.

Harriet hugged her wordlessly. Harriet seemed genuinely sad, and that made Ellen feel even more miserable.

On a day when she should be receiving congratulations from everyone, Ellen couldn't remember a single word she had heard or said.

It felt as if her soul had momentarily left her body and returned.

What happened today?

What did I do?

It felt like a fleeting dream.

A dream.

Futile and empty.

All the moments she had worked for felt meaningless.

After Liana left, Ellen removed her makeup, showered, and sat blankly on her bed.

The cheers and applause of countless people echoed like distant reverberations.

There was someone she wanted to defeat.

There was a vote she wanted to receive.

But neither of them was there.

"…”

Were they together?

Ellen felt miserable just thinking about it.

She received everyone's cheers and praises, but for some reason, it felt as if she had failed at everything.

Ellen looked at the trophy, evidence of her Miss Temple victory, in her room.

She didn't really need it.

It wasn't bad to receive it, and it was certainly evidence of someone's acknowledgment.

Ellen stared at the trophy for a while and then opened the door.

She felt like she needed a change of pace.

She opened the door.

She just wanted to take a walk.

She wanted to take a walk, and there was no other reason. Casually glancing around the hallway and the lobby.

Checking if someone had returned or if someone was around.

Thinking that she just wanted a change of pace.

Ellen quietly scanned the A-Class dormitory and headed outside.

She was dressed in light training clothes. It didn't seem like she had changed much, but Ellen found her reflection in the window fascinating.

Clothing seemed incredibly important.

Ellen realized this as she saw herself dressed in training clothes in the window.

The gap between her previous self and her current self was significant.

Even when she had been dressed in a flashy dress and heavy makeup, she had felt miserable.

Now that she had returned to her original appearance, she looked even more miserable than before.

She wanted to show herself.

She wondered what expression he would have when he saw her like that.

She was curious.

She had been pondering what to say in that state.

Suppressing those thoughts, Ellen headed outside the dormitory.

Was he not coming back today?

Had something serious happened?

Despite trying not to think about it, the thoughts kept flooding in, leaving Ellen feeling confused.

She had asked him to come, but he didn't. There must be a reason.

Could it be that, like always, he had found himself in another dangerous situation? If so, rather than feeling hurt by his absence, she should be worried.

Maybe she should go and look for him.

Feeling her imagination spiraling out of control, Ellen heads toward the dormitory entrance.

And then, she sees him.

A familiar figure from behind.

Sitting on the steps of the dormitory entrance was a familiar back view. The Temple Academy uniform was nowhere to be seen, replaced by casual clothes. Yet, the back of that head was unmistakable.

"…”

For a moment, the countless confusions, questions, and feelings of hurt that arose in her mind subsided.

Ellen quietly approaches.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, ah!"

Startled by her voice, Reinhardt almost rolls forward as he gets up.

"Uh, um… Well…”

It's a cold day.

Reinhardt, his face flushed from sitting there for who knows how long, looks at her with a bewildered expression.

His fingertips, face, and the tip of his nose are all red.

Why is he just sitting there on the dormitory steps, without coming inside?

Ellen cocks her head as she looks at Reinhardt.

"Aren't you cold?"

"Well… You see…”

"…”

Even though it's cold, could it be that he couldn't come inside?

He could have come in, but maybe he couldn't.

There must be something he needed to say, but it seemed like no words would suffice.

On this bitterly cold night, Reinhardt had returned some time ago but was unable to bring himself to enter the dormitory.

He must have been unsure of what to say if he encountered her. Whether she was in the dormitory lobby or elsewhere, there was no way to know if he would run into her.

So, he remained outside the dormitory, unable to decide whether to enter, simply sitting there aimlessly.

Ellen looks at the shivering Reinhardt.

It's clear that he's not shivering from the cold but for another reason.

He looks so foolish.

"Aren't you cold?"

"Uh… A little?"

"I feel like taking a walk."

At Ellen's words, Reinhardt shakes his head vigorously.

"No, not cold at all. This is nothing."

Ellen chuckles at Reinhardt's response.

"Let's go."

As if being led away.

Ellen takes the lead, and Reinhardt follows.

CHAPTER 324

The guilty remain silent.

And so, Reinhardt said nothing, merely observing the situation.

Ellen, too, walked without speaking.

As a result, they maintained a reasonable distance from each other, with Ellen walking a bit ahead and Reinhardt following behind.

The festival would last until the weekend. Even though it was nighttime, the main street was still filled with bright lights. They walked uphill, near the royal class area, and looked at the night view as they went.

They walked for a long while.

While they didn't run together, both took this route on their daily morning runs. Consequently, they were familiar with the place, even at night, and knew where each path led.

They walked down a road they both knew well.

At a bench atop a hill with a beautiful view, Ellen sat down first. Reinhardt carefully took a seat next to her.

"I didn't tell you to sit."

"Ah, I, uh…"

At Ellen's words, Reinhardt was startled and stood up as quickly as he had sat down.

Ellen laughed as she watched the flustered Reinhardt.

"What does it matter whether I told you to sit or not?"

"Well… uh… that is…"

"Just sit."

He looked incredibly serious as he observed her every move. It was as if he had committed a grave offense.

Ellen gazed at the night view of the temple while Reinhardt hesitantly sat beside her.

Had Reinhardt truly done something so terrible?

Why was it a mistake?

Ellen couldn't precisely explain the reason.

However, she felt as if the entire world had abandoned her. It was sad and heartrending.

In reality, that wasn't the case.

The entire world had chosen her, and only one person had abandoned her.

Why did it feel as if the whole world had left her behind?

It was probably because Reinhardt was her entire world.

Ellen looked at the petals falling before her eyes.

No.

They weren't petals.

"Snow…"

"…Yeah."

It had started to snow without them realizing.

The snowflakes, like white flower petals, fell gently from the sky.

It wasn't a particularly warm and friendly situation.

Not knowing what to say to each other, and fearing that a single wrong word could wound both parties.

Reinhardt didn't know how to explain his situation.

Ellen didn't know how to describe her pain.

Both were afraid that even a slight miscommunication could escalate into a major conflict. So, they remained silent.

In the end.

Who are you?

What are you?

What are we, exactly?

When those words are uttered, they know they can only hurt each other.

So, they don't speak.

On a snowy winter night.

Ellen and Reinhardt sit on a bench, quietly letting the snow fall upon them.

The cold day prevented the snow on the ground from melting.

As soon as it hit the ground, the snow was swept away by the wind.

In this way, it drifted to a corner, piling up.

That's the nature of snow.

"…"

"…"

What are we, really?

How did it come to this?

Where did it all go wrong?

Ellen tried to think back, but she couldn't pinpoint the exact moment when everything started to change.

Was it during their first swordsmanship class when Reinhardt was knocked unconscious by her practice sword?

Or when the unconscious Reinhardt woke up and invited her to try some bizarre food she had never seen before for lunch?

Was it when Reinhardt started meddling in her late-night snacking habits?

Or the first time he cooked a meal for her?

Or perhaps when she couldn't bear his constant interference and began teaching him swordsmanship in return?

Or maybe after their harrowing journey to the Darklands?

As Ellen retraced their history, she realized that there wasn't just one starting point. Countless moments had accumulated and snowballed into something bigger.

Snow keeps piling up.

Piled-up snow can be shoveled away.

But the time that has passed cannot be cleared.

That's why the moments tagged with Reinhardt's name have accumulated in the space she calls her heart.

Piling up.

Until Ellen's heart was full of moments marked with Reinhardt's name.

Now, she wished she could hate him.

But she found it difficult to do so.

Even if she filled the remaining spaces in her heart with resentment and bitterness towards Reinhardt, there was already too much filled space.

She wanted to hate him, but she couldn't.

And it was strange.

She knew it.

Even though Reinhardt couldn't say it, he felt deep remorse.

His hands and face turning red to the point of swelling, aimlessly wasting time outside.

He must feel sorry for causing her distress again, for not being able to explain anything about it.

Ellen was the one who felt hurt.

But for some reason, it seemed to her that Reinhardt was suffering more.

He seemed tormented by his inability to even apologize.

Ellen couldn't help but wonder what was causing Reinhardt so much pain. But as always, Reinhardt wouldn't tell her.

"You didn't have to come see me."

“…What?"

Ellen said that.

"You didn't really have to come see me."

Ellen quietly repeated her words. They didn't owe each other anything.

"So… don't feel too sorry…”

There was no need for Reinhardt to feel obligated, no need for him to feel such guilt over not fulfilling that obligation, and no reason for Ellen to feel hurt.

Reinhardt stared at Ellen silently.

It's not that she was unfazed.

He looked at Ellen, who pretended to be unfazed.

-Wham

"Ah."

Suddenly, Reinhardt embraced Ellen.

"Just… get angry…"

"…"

"It's scarier… and more regretful… when you hold it in…"

"…"

Although her mind told her there was no reason to be angry, her heart couldn't help but feel hurt and upset.

Could we be close enough to get upset and feel hurt by such things?

Ellen couldn't be certain.

However, Reinhardt was embracing her.

It only made her feel colder.

Having been outside for so long, her body and hands were chilled. Being embraced like this only made Ellen feel colder.

Yet, despite shivering from the cold, Reinhardt continued to hold her.

She didn't know what had happened, but he seemed so remorseful.

As if he was suffering even more.

If it was this bad, it must have been something he truly couldn't avoid.

Ellen convinced herself of this.

People don't always understand what can be understood.

They understand what they want to understand.

Ellen wanted to understand Reinhardt right now. So, she accepted deep down that there must have been an important reason.

Seeing him in such pain, she convinced herself that there must have been a significant matter.

Inside Reinhardt's cold embrace, Ellen gritted her teeth.

His shirt slowly dampened.

"I'm… hurt…"

"I'm sorry."

"I… worked… hard… I prepared… so much."

As Ellen trembled slightly and choked out her words while crying, Reinhardt held her tightly.

"Even though… I looked… everywhere… You were… gone… I asked… you… to be… there…"

"I'm sorry…"

Even as she cried, Ellen thought:

It should be Reinhardt who needs comfort, not me.

Yet, she couldn't stop her tears.

Tears are like that, after all.

It was a deep, dark night.

Having cried for a long time, Ellen pulled away from Reinhardt's embrace.

And then, she stared blankly at the temple below.

"…"

Reinhardt didn't say what had happened, and Ellen didn't ask.

Of course, Reinhardt was restless.

After crying for a while, Ellen suddenly stopped and stared blankly at the night view. Wondering if her heart hadn't completely calmed down, or what she should do.

In reality, it was the opposite.

Ellen gritted her teeth.

Not because of anything else, but out of embarrassment.

Once her emotions subsided, she realized what she had done.

She had been so devastated that her friend hadn't come to the beauty contest, as if the world was ending. Now, she finally realized what she had done.

He might not have been able to come.

Now that she felt better, it was Ellen who found the situation difficult to bear.

That's why Ellen couldn't say anything and stared blankly at the night view with a stiff expression.

Why had she felt so empty and lost over something so trivial? Now, she couldn't understand it.

Reinhardt wasn't there.

That was why she felt as if the world had abandoned her.

Now, Reinhardt was by her side.

Just that fact alone was enough to comfort her.

Ellen glared at Reinhardt out of the blue.

Now that she felt better, she couldn't help but be a little spiteful.

"Uh, um… Why? Is there something… you want to say?"

Reinhardt, still bowing deeply, stuttered as if he would do anything she asked.

'I need you to be there for me.'

Seeing his face again was enough to dissolve the spite that had risen within her. Ellen stood up from the bench.

Snow was falling.

Considering Reinhardt's ice-cold body, he couldn't stay outside any longer.

"Aren't you cold?"

"It's fine, I can handle this much."

As they walked again, Ellen examined Reinhardt.

"You've been outside this whole time."

He had already been waiting outside, cautious not to be noticed, and must have been even colder as they walked around.

Reinhardt seemed to be fine, just walking along.

"You can go inside if you're cold."

Ellen said that, worried he might catch a cold.

“…I just want to be here with you like this."

"Ah."

At his words, Ellen felt her heart skip a beat.

It seemed like such an ordinary thing to say.

He had probably said something similar before.

Yet now, she couldn't help but read into every word and thought.

Ellen wondered if she was going insane.

Just moments ago, she had felt so lonely and miserable, as if abandoned by the world.

But now, she felt an odd sensation, as if she owned the whole world.

Could a person's mood really fluctuate this wildly in an instant?

Could one person feel like their entire world?

When that person smiles, I feel good.

When that person likes me, I feel good.

Is it okay for my every emotion to stem from a single person? Is it okay for the master of my life to become someone other than myself?

The two walked through the snowy night streets.

As they approached a downhill slope, Reinhardt glanced at Ellen and said,

"Be careful. You might sliiiiip!"

-Thud!

"????"

As she watched Reinhardt, who had fallen on his back on the slope while warning her not to slip, Ellen tried to help him up.

-Slip!

"!"

-Thump!

In the process, she slipped as well, landing squarely on her bottom.

“…What are we doing, you and I?"

"Indeed…”

The two got up and dusted off their bottoms.

While maintaining a proper distance, they walked through the snowy night streets.

From the bottom of the hill, they could hear the sound of people bustling amidst the brilliant night view of the main street.

Even at night, the 24-hour shops sold food. Ellen alternately gazed at the distant night view and Reinhardt.

“…Do you want to go?"

With her cheeks flushed, Ellen nodded quietly.

“…Yes."

Ellen said.

It wasn't that she specifically wanted to go at this time, but rather that she wanted to go precisely because it was this time.

A night with the first snowfall.

Because they were together.

"If you want to go, then we should."

The festival's finale was drawing near.

Not the Last, But Close to the Last Night

However, it was only now that Ellen felt as if the festival had just begun.

Only at this last moment, when she could finally be alone with Reinhardt, did Ellen truly feel the festival.

Although midnight had passed, Main Street was still bustling with people.

Drinking was not allowed within the temple grounds, but as it was the festival season, the streets were filled with sights and entertainment to enjoy even late into the night.

Of course.

-Om nom nom

For Ellen, it was mostly limited to eating.

"This is delicious."

"Uh, yeah."

With a chubby expression, Ellen handed a skewer of rice cake to Reinhardt, who ate it silently.

The emotion that was similar to anger but not quite had already subsided. However, Reinhardt still thought of himself as a sinner and followed Ellen without saying anything.

It wasn't exactly a warm atmosphere.

The two wandered the streets, looking at various sights, watching street performances, and eating food from street vendors.

Naturally, Ellen was a bit special today.

“Isn't that her, that person?”

“Huh? Seems like it.”

Reinhardt couldn't help but hear the murmurs from the people around them.

As a group of men and women approached cautiously and blocked their path, Reinhardt frowned.

"What do you want, blocking someone's way…?"

"Aren't you Miss Temple?!"

Taken aback by the sudden question, Reinhardt froze, while Ellen calmly nodded.

"Yes."

"What?"

"Uh, no wonder… Even in casual clothes, you seem to shine!"

Looking at Ellen, who calmly admitted it, and the noisy crowd, Reinhardt felt dumbfounded.

"You… Did you win?"

Reinhardt mumbled in disbelief, and Ellen's lips began to curl up, seeing his shocked reaction.

“…Would it be wrong if I did?"

"No, no. It's just that…”

Annoyed, Ellen strode ahead, leaving Reinhardt behind.

A warm cup of lemon tea was enough to appease the sulking Ellen.

"Well, I didn't think you'd fail, but you didn't say anything, so I thought you didn't make it."

"I got it."

The two sat on a bench, sipping warm lemon tea. Ellen had not only been at the contest venue but also in the actual parade, so there were quite a few people on the streets with keen eyes who recognized her even in casual clothes.

Though no one approached to speak directly, many whispered as they passed by.

“Isn't that Miss Temple?”

“I guess so.”

“And the guy next to her? Her boyfriend?”

“…Damn.”

“…What's the big deal about feeling sorry for her?”

“Who's saying what?”

“Come on, she's Miss Temple and even a Royal Class.”

“Really?”

As they passed by, everyone had a word or two about Ellen, and by extension, Reinhardt couldn't help but hear a word or two as well.

Ellen's mouth twitched for an entirely different reason now.

"Annoying."

It seemed that she found it bothersome for people to recognize her. Ellen paid no mind to such things.

She thought it was only bothersome because people recognized her, nothing more.

Miss Temple of this year, who wore a pure white dress while receiving the cheers and applause of countless people, was now wandering the winter streets at night wearing a black tracksuit. She blatantly showed how much she disliked being recognized.

Ellen glared at Reinhardt.

"It's all because of you."

"Uh… I'm sorry…"

Reinhardt looked helpless under her glare, as if he had only caused side effects without fulfilling her wishes.

Feeling annoyed by people recognizing and whispering about them, and occasionally being approached, Ellen and Reinhardt left the main street.

As it was nighttime, there were far fewer people once they left the main street.

Since it was snowing, a little bit of snow piled up on their heads and shoulders.

"Miss Temple… Congratulations on your victory."

"…It doesn't mean anything."

"Is that so?"

Ellen, who had participated in the contest for a different reason, didn't particularly want to hear congratulations, especially from him.

As they walked in silence, snow accumulated on their shoulders and heads.

"Just stay still for a moment."

"…?"

Reinhardt, who had been walking for a while, stopped Ellen and brushed off the snow on her shoulders and head.

Just as she was about to walk away again, Ellen looked at Reinhardt's shoulder.

There, too, snow had piled up.

He brushed the snow off her without even considering brushing off his own shoulders and head.

It seemed he hadn't thought of it.

He could see the snow piled on Ellen's head and shoulders, but he didn't consider that there would naturally be snow on his own shoulders too.

So, Ellen looked at Reinhardt, who couldn't brush it off.

“…Why?"

"…”

This time, Ellen brushed off the snow on Reinhardt's shoulders and head herself.

Then, Ellen spoke quietly.

"You're a fool."

“…Really?"

Reinhardt, puzzled by her sudden comment, matched her pace as she walked ahead.

Reinhardt was a strange fellow.

"You're strange."

“…I hear that a lot."

Ellen walked silently.

"I thought you were strange from the beginning, and I still think you're strange now."

"Is that so?"

Ellen exhaled a white breath and took a sip of her lemon tea.

Perhaps because she had been holding it for a while, it was a bit cold.

"But the strangeness I felt when I first thought you were strange, and the strangeness I feel now when I think you're strange… They seem so different."

"…"

Reinhardt, who would pick fights and butt heads with anyone, was strange.

However, as time went by and she got to know more about Reinhardt, he was a much stranger person now, but in a different sense than before.

"If only you weren't such a strange person. I sometimes think that, but…"

Ellen sighed as she looked at Reinhardt.

"If you weren't so strange, this wouldn't have happened."

Ellen muttered as if talking to herself. She averted her gaze from Reinhardt and looked forward again.

"Did you want to come today?"

"Of course, I…"

"Don't be vague."

Ellen stopped walking and turned Reinhardt to face her.

And looked straight at him.

Ellen's gaze seemed to be asking for a clear answer.

Their relationship had always been filled with ambiguous words.

They had always tiptoed around the truth, afraid that something might break if it became clear. Reinhardt and Ellen had a strange relationship – neither something nor nothing.

They tried to make something clear, but when Reinhardt couldn't come, it became vague again.

Still, she wanted to be certain about this.

While looking straight into Reinhardt's eyes, Ellen seemed to be urging him not to avoid answering.

She asked directly.

"Did you want to see me today?"

"…"

She wouldn't press him about why he couldn't come.

She wouldn't ask what had happened.

She wouldn't mention the sadness and sorrow anymore.

Ellen demanded a clear answer.

"Yes."

Reinhardt nodded.

But Ellen didn't plan to stop there.

"How much?"

At that question, Reinhardt stared at Ellen.

After much hesitation, Reinhardt finally seemed to give in.

He opened his mouth as if confessing.

“…I think I'll regret it for the rest of my life. Not being able to come today."

"…"

A lifetime.

Regret.

Regret isn't a pleasant word, but the combination of the two words had a somewhat comforting resonance.

A lifetime.

You are someone who can have an impact on my entire life.

It was as if she had heard such words.

"Shall I show you?"

"Yes."

Seeing Reinhardt's immediate response, Ellen couldn't help but burst into laughter.

His expression was so foolish.

He really wanted to come.

He really couldn't come because he had no choice.

No need for countless excuses and reasons.

The answer that jumped out at a single question of whether to show him, and the foolish expression.

That expression completely wiped away the last lingering resentment Ellen had.

The two returned to the dormitory.

"It's weird."

-... How weird is it?

"I can't put it on by myself."

-Ah… I see.

In her room, Ellen tried to put on the dress she had worn today but ended up in a complete mess.

She couldn't tighten the corset by herself, so the dress looked like it had been hastily put on and abandoned.

She had said she would show him, but on the way back, Ellen realized something was wrong.

It was a dress that Liana had originally helped her put on. So, on the way back, Ellen realized she couldn't even wear the dress properly.

Despite thinking she could somehow manage, once back in the dormitory, she struggled and realized it was impossible to put on the dress she had worn today in her room.

It was not Reinhardt who was swept away by the atmosphere, but Ellen.

All her worries about not having makeup on and her hair coming undone were pointless.

It was a dress she couldn't wear by herself.

And since it was dawn, she couldn't wake Liana, who would be sleeping.

Looking in the mirror, she saw herself in a mess, the dress merely draped over her body.

She couldn't show him this.

"…"

In the end, her last attempt had turned out like this.

She couldn't show him.

Ellen was unreasonably upset.

Angry, she stomped on the floor.

-Thud! Thud-thud!

-Why, why are you doing that?!

"No, it's nothing."

Ellen, full of irritation, tried to take off the dress she had hastily put on.

Of course, a dress is not only difficult to put on but also to take off.

-Snap!

Eventually, Ellen tripped and fell.

"…"

-What on earth is going on?

CHAPTER 325

Ellen changed back into her training clothes.

Ellen was extremely angry.

The situation itself was infuriating enough to make her want to burst with annoyance.

Worse, she couldn't show what she wanted to, while Reinhardt seemed to find the whole situation amusing, which made her even more upset.

She had promised to show him how she looked in a dress, but after realizing she couldn't put it on by herself, she found his amusement infuriating.

However, Ellen was somewhat puzzled.

Instead of asking why, Reinhardt simply agreed when she told him she couldn't put the dress on by herself.

It was as if he had experienced it himself.

Of course, that couldn't be possible.

Anyway, it seemed Reinhardt understood that she couldn't help but not show him how she looked in the dress.

The two were now at the dining hall.

They had both been busy during the festival, and it had been a while since they had a late-night meal together.

"What do you want to eat?"

Therefore, Reinhardt brought Ellen to the dining hall, suggesting they should eat something.

"Beef stew."

Annoyed, Ellen ordered a time-consuming and bothersome dish.

"Alright."

However, Reinhardt nodded obediently, as if he would do anything for her today. Ellen was surprised since she expected him to complain.

She quietly watched Reinhardt as he entered the kitchen and began preparing something.

She wanted to show him, but in the end, she couldn't.

But was that really so important?

Chop, chop, chop

While watching Reinhardt start cutting, Ellen smiled. She kept observing Reinhardt as he cooked.

Haaaaaah

Not long after, Ellen turned her head to the sound coming from the hallway.

“Oh, Ellen?”

Harriet, looking very exhausted, met Ellen's gaze while walking down the hallway. She must have been working late in the magic research room.

Slowly approaching the dining table where Ellen was sitting, Harriet said:

"What are you doing up so late…”

She tried to continue her sentence but widened her eyes upon seeing the kitchen.

"Reinhardt?"

Surprise was only momentary.

Ellen could see the veins popping out of Harriet's eyes.

"Hey!"

“Uh, uh?”

Harriet quickly walked to the kitchen and shouted in her clear voice.

“You! Where have you been today?”

“Uh… Um, why all of a sudden?”

“You wandered around without saying anything! Why didn't you come to the contest?”

“Uh… Ah, well. That… There was a reason?”

“What? Hurry up and tell me!”

“There was… a situation…”

“What situation? You jerk!”

“Ah, ah! Wait! Why are you hitting me! I'm holding a knife, you know? I have a knife in my hand… Ack!”

“You! Bad! Guy! Ah!”

Ellen saw Harriet's face turn bright red as she pounded Reinhardt's back. Ellen just stared blankly at the scene.

She should be the one who's angry.

Instead, Harriet's face turned bright red with anger.

"Are you seriously doing this with just strength? Strength! Huh? You've been hitting me non-stop lately, haven't you? You want me to show you my strength? Huh?"

"Uh… shouldn't we be grateful that it's only strength? How about with your special skill? You want to try it with that?"

"No, no… that's not what I meant…”

"Then, just take it quietly! It's not like it hurts when I hit you!"

"But it will hurt if you keep hitting me!"

Harriet was extremely angry.

Harriet should have wished that Reinhardt wouldn't come. Ellen thought so, but Harriet was earnestly furious and continued to pummel Reinhardt relentlessly.

It was strange.

Ellen thought she understood, to some extent, why Harriet was so angry.

As much as Harriet cherished Reinhardt, she must have been worried about the injuries she received today.

That's why Harriet didn't congratulate Ellen for winning Miss Temple, but instead comforted her with a hug.

Ellen could hardly get angry herself.

Harriet was getting angry on Ellen's behalf.

It was amusing to watch.

And Ellen was grateful.

And sorry.

So very sorry.

Ellen laughed.

While laughing.

She didn't know why tears were coming, but.

Ellen laughed and quietly wiped away her tears.

"So, are you going to try and eat me alive now that we're a bit closer? Is that why you cooked that?"

"Of course."

The three of them gathered around a pot of beef stew that had been completed without them realizing. Harriet had joined them somehow, but Ellen didn't find it uncomfortable.

"It's snowing outside."

Harriet mentioned while looking out the restaurant window. Both Ellen and Reinhardt had just come in from the snow, but Harriet seemed to have been cooped up in the magic laboratory.

"Do you want to eat on the terrace?"

Harriet seemed to imagine eating warm stew while watching the snowy scenery.

Harriet de Saint-Owan valued a bit of romance.

"Let's do that."

Not seeing any harm in it, they went out to the restaurant terrace and placed the pot of stew on the table.

The night breeze was chilly, but it wasn't too cold. The three of them sat at the terrace table, each scooping a bowl of stew and eating a little at a time.

It wasn't a blizzard but rather a light snowfall.

It had been falling for quite a while, and a considerable amount had accumulated.

"It reminds me of when we made snowmen."

Harriet said, smiling quietly as if reminiscing about that time.

"It wasn't a snowman, it was a snow giant."

"Anyway, you're silly."

Ellen made a human-sized snowman, while Harriet made a huge snow giant.

At that time, they entered the Epiaux fortress again and found out that it was a place haunted by ghosts. As if suddenly remembering something, Harriet's expression changed, and she looked back and forth between Reinhardt and Ellen.

"But you know what's funny?"

"No? I don't know."

"Do you want to refute me directly? You're really annoying!"

"Why have you been so short-tempered lately? It's like you have a disease or something."

At Reinhardt's teasing, Harriet's face turned bright red.

"Do you really have to get on someone's nerves at least once a day? Why are you like this?"

"Technically speaking, it's just you. I only do this to you because it has to be you."

"Don't use that kind of language in this context! It's really annoying!"

Harriet's lips quivered. Watching Reinhardt's expression as he continued to torment her was enough to make one's blood boil. Even though his taunts were not directed at her, sometimes her fists would clench involuntarily.

"So, what's so funny?"

"I don't know! You made me so mad, I forgot!"

Harriet huffed and scooped a spoonful of stew into her mouth.

"!!!"

Of course, she had not let the very hot stew cool down enough and ended up with wide eyes, unable to spit it out, flailing her arms and stomping her feet.

"Spit it out! What are you doing?"

"!!"

Reinhardt looked at her disdainfully, and Harriet, perhaps unable to spit out her food due to her noble dignity, struggled for a while before finally swallowing it.

"My mouth is all burned…"

Harriet opened her mouth wide, looking exhausted.

"It must be hot, try eating something cold."

"What's going on? Are you going to get water… hey, what are you trying to do…?"

"Something cold."

Harriet face turned pale as she watched Reinhardt scoop up a handful of snow from the terrace railing.

"You're not… no, no way… no way…"

Harriet knew such a thing was possible.

She could calculate in her head what crazy thing Reinhardt was about to do.

But even then, she couldn't believe he would go that far with her.

For a moment, she didn't react at all.

And Reinhardt was, without a doubt, the madman who would actually do it.

-Smack!

"Kyah!"

A snowball hit Harriet squarely in the mouth, causing her to scream in shock.

"Feeling cooler?"

"You, just, just now… what… what did you do to me?"

When something unimaginable happens, sometimes anger can't be expressed immediately, and this was one of those times.

Of course, that was only for a moment.

With trembling hands, Harriet wiped the snow from her lips and, her face turning red, reached for Reinhardt.

"I'll kill you!"

-Whack!

"Ugh!"

-Thud!

A blue magic line appeared on Harriet's forearm, and Reinhardt, hit by the shockwave, was flung off the terrace and slammed into the ground.

"You must be insane!"

"No, if it's hot, you should cool it down. Right?"

Reinhardt, who had been flung off the terrace and had climbed back up by grabbing the railing, sat down again.

Harriet, still fuming, brushed the snow off Reinhardt's clothes.

"Anyway, if it's hot, spit it out. Why do you force yourself to eat it?"

"I wasn't raised on the streets like someone else here; I learned to live with dignity, you know?"

"Really? Does that undignified behavior of yours, just now going 'Ugh! Ugh!' also count as grace?"

"Wha… What… What do you mean? When did I ever do that like you!"

As Reinhardt exaggeratedly imitated the gesture Harriet had just made, twisting his body, she seemed to get even more annoyed and started grumbling again for a while.

Whenever they were together, they would bicker over trivial things for quite some time. Although the conversations that followed were devoid of any substance, they would often find themselves losing track of time.

Eventually, after going back and forth for a while, they both seemed to tire of each other and began to eat the stew in silence.

"It's beautiful…"

Harriet mumbled absentmindedly as she gazed at the snowy landscape.

"Thanks."

"I wasn't talking about you… Hmph, I won't be fooled. I won't fall for it, you know?"

Although she acted as if she had built up immunity, Harriet would still instantly react to any casual remark thrown her way.

The night of the festival.

It wasn't particularly boisterous.

In the end, the three of them gathered on a quiet, snowing night to eat beef stew.

This was an ordinary event, not a special day.

However, Ellen was well aware that these moments wouldn't last forever. A day would come when they could no longer spend time like this.

And when that time comes, they would remember these moments.

They would think that every day they spent together had been special.

Ellen vaguely guessed.

Maybe this was enough.

As they had been doing so far, they could continue like this.

Wouldn't it be enough just to continue living this way?

Without being greedy, without wishing for more. Ellen found herself quite content with this.

There was no need to get closer.

Maybe it was enough not to drift apart.

"Hey, fetch some water."

"To me… Are you asking me right now?"

"Who else if not you?"

"Don't order me around!"

"My goodness, can't you just fetch some water while you eat?"

"Ugh, fine! I'll get it!"

The only person who would dare to treat a princess like this was Reinhardt. Seeing Harriet's reaction to him was quite endearing even to Ellen.

The princess.

As that thought crossed her mind, Ellen recalled a question she had forgotten.

"By the way, I'm curious about something."

Ellen tilted her head.

"What are you curious about?"

Harriet, who had been fetching water, stared intently at Ellen upon hearing her question.

"How did your parents know Reinhardt?"

"Oh."

"Ah… That… That's…"

Their awkward response made Ellen tilt her head again.

After hearing the detailed circumstances from Reinhardt, Ellen nodded.

"Ah… That senior?"

"Yes."

Ellen had been aware of Adriana's sudden dropout, but she hadn't known the specifics.

Of course, Reinhardt hadn't fully explained the situation; he only mentioned that he had business in the Saint Owan Duchy due to a certain incident and had become acquainted with Arunaria of the White Palace while stopping by to resolve the warp gate issue on his way back.

When Adriana's name was mentioned, Reinhardt's expression darkened slightly, but Ellen simply assumed it was due to concern.

With a puzzled look, Harriet spoke to Ellen as if confiding in her.

"Isn't he really strange? Even if he's a royal class like me, it doesn't make sense. Coming to our palace, knocking on the door, and asking for priority access to the warp gate?"

"…You're right."

Arunaria was not a place one could visit as easily as a friend's house, and even if it were a friend's house, it would be rude to visit at such an hour.

But he had visited not just a friend's house, but a palace of an entire nation in that manner.

"No, without saying anything, I skipped… You guys seemed like you were going to kill me…"

Reinhardt defended himself in a small voice.

It was even more surprising to Ellen that the Duke had opened the door and welcomed the entire family, despite such an intrusion.

She had wondered what was going on, but it was quite unexpected for Ellen that Adriana's issue was involved.

Thinking about it, Ellen roughly guessed when Reinhardt had visited the Saint Owan Duchy.

However, it was still astonishing that he had traveled that far in just one day.

Ellen found Reinhardt's actions to be mysterious. With their forgotten question resolved, the three tried to resume eating their stew.

"Um… there…"

But Harriet discovered something in the scenery outside the terrace and pointed it out.

The first-year dormitory was on the first floor.

And because it was a terrace, the outside view was much clearer.

In the direction Harriet pointed, Ellen could see the person whose whereabouts had been unknown today.

"…That senior."

And the situation became even stranger.

The dropout senior they had just mentioned was with her.

Adriana.

Olivia was walking towards the royal class dormitory with Adriana.

Reinhardt quickly stood up and looked at the two.

Some strange emotions flickered across Reinhardt's eyes, but Ellen couldn't tell what they were.

Olivia and Adriana inevitably made eye contact with the three watching them from the terrace.

“Ah, Reinhardt…”

Olivia Lanze.

“Junior…”

Adriana.

“Sorry, I'm a bit busy right now. Let's talk later.”

Before Reinhardt could say anything, Olivia hurriedly led Adriana toward the dormitory entrance.

Harriet and Ellen tilted their heads as they watched them, and Reinhardt sat down again.

The tournament ended with a runner-up finish.

Miss Temple couldn't even participate.

And then, suddenly returning to the Temple in the deep night with Adriana, who had dropped out.

“…I wonder what happened to that sister today?"

“…Indeed."

Reinhardt took a sip of water.

“…I'll have to ask later."

Reinhardt said this, but all he did was take another sip of water.

Ellen looked at Reinhardt.

It was Reinhardt who had gone all the way to the Saint Owan Duchy upon hearing the news of Adriana's dropout.

There was no way that someone like Reinhardt would obediently sit still when he said he'd talk about it later.

Reinhardt was not that kind of person.

Ellen looked at Reinhardt, who was quietly staring in the direction where Adriana and Olivia had gone.

Reinhardt knew something.

It wasn't that she deliberately tried to figure it out, but because she knew Reinhardt too well.

Ellen naturally realized this.

CHAPTER 326

The following day.

There was a massive uproar in the Imperial Capital.

Rumors about the battle that took place on the outskirts of the southern part of the Imperial Capital last night had quickly spread.

It was said that a monstrous lifeform, believed to be a demon, had flown across the night sky, and that large-scale destructive magic had been cast, powerful enough to influence the weather.

"The demons have appeared!"

Naturally, such rumors could not help but reach the Temple quickly.

I quietly watched Kono Lint excitedly retelling the gossip he had picked up in the streets.

"Demon? What demon, all of a sudden?"

"Apparently, demons appeared in the southern part of the Imperial Capital yesterday, and there was a huge commotion."

"What happened?"

"I didn't hear the details. Just that demons had appeared…"

Since it had happened last night, the specifics of the situation were not yet widely known. It was only natural for the children to be shocked by the sudden news of demons during the festival.

It was breakfast time, and Ellen looked at me with a serious, stern expression.

"Could it be the same demons from that time?"

“…Maybe."

"What's their plan this time?"

"I don't know…”

Ellen, Harriet, and Liana, as well as all their classmates, were bewildered by the unexpected news of demons.

There was no way I could be suspected.

Even if I didn't tell anyone about my whereabouts yesterday, it would be an excessive leap to think I was involved in the attack.

It doesn't make sense for someone to suspect their friend might be a demon in the first place.

At most, Ellen might suspect the possibility of involvement in a crime through the Rotary Club.

Sometimes, something is so unbelievable that suspicion can't take hold.

It was clear that Charlotte and Bertus would be busy again, and there was only one conclusion.

A state of emergency would be declared in the Imperial Capital, and the festival could not continue.

As I expected, Charlotte was absent, and Saviolin Turner, who had been acting as a temporary supervisor, had also disappeared from the dormitory, presumably returning to the Imperial Palace.

It was inevitable since the elite holy knights were massacred near the Imperial Capital.

If the attack had taken place within the Imperial Capital rather than the southern part, the loss of life would have been tremendous.

During a time when the population was already high, if even a single top-tier destructive spell used by high-ranking demons had been cast within the Imperial Capital, tens of thousands would have easily perished.

And so, the feast had ended.

Now, it was time for everyone to return home.

At the top floor of the dormitory, in the empty clubroom.

I was sitting there with Olivia and Adriana.

Last night, Adriana had stayed in Olivia's room. It would have been impossible under normal circumstances, but it seemed she was able to sneak into the temple during the festival.

"Did you have a good time, my junior…?"

"Yes, well, I…"

Adriana had made the excuse that she was just visiting, but her pale complexion and expression made it impossible to hide that something was going on.

Olivia was not much different.

Adriana was used as bait to lure Olivia out.

It must have been quite a shock. Her distrust towards the faithful had already been growing, and she tried to erase such worries through a monastic life. Yet, even there, she experienced more disappointment.

Adriana's mental state couldn't possibly be normal.

Both Olivia and Adriana were saved by me, but they don't know that.

I didn't want to show off, nor could I.

Olivia's expression was a mix of gloom and guilt. She probably thought I was upset with her since yesterday.

Olivia looked at Adriana.

As if seeking agreement, Adriana gave a slight nod. I could see it.

"Did you hear about the demon attack?"

"I'm not sure about the details, but yes."

Olivia trusts me.

"We were at the scene… when the demons attacked."

Olivia seemed to want to tell me everything, rather than making excuses.

Hearing the story from Olivia's mouth, which I already knew, was awkward. Pretending to be surprised was harder than I thought.

Of course, the story I heard from them wasn't very long.

The head of the Artuan monastery where Adriana had been was a member of a secret religious group called the Nameless Monastery, and she handed her over to Riverrier Lanze.

In a sense, the head of the monastery was also deceived. She wouldn't have expected that Adriana would be used as bait.

Afraid that saying anything at the scene would endanger both her and the head of the monastery, Adriana had no choice but to be taken away quietly.

As expected, the ex-leader of the Holy Knights lured Olivia out, and Olivia headed to the scene as soon as she received the letter.

There, they fought against Riverrier Lanze when suddenly, demons appeared.

"The strange thing is… those demons… saved us."

Confusion was written all over Olivia and Adriana's faces.

When Olivia was captured by a terrifying and bizarre demon, she thought about the battle after Adriana's safety had been secured.

But strangely, that demon dropped them off far away from the ruined monastery and simply left.

Olivia and Adriana had no choice but to flee in a panic after witnessing a large-scale magical attack on the monastery.

"I can't understand it."

Both Adriana and Olivia nodded at my words.

Pretending to be surprised and ignorant was difficult, even though I knew the truth. However, the gravity of the situation made it easy to take it seriously.

It was a relief that they told me. Now, I could discuss alternatives with them.

"I think it's best not to tell anyone about this."

“…We've been thinking the same."

"We don't know why the demons acted that way, but if that fact becomes known, we might be accused of colluding with the demons… In that case, we need to deal with the surviving Holy Knights first…”

There were no survivors. There may have been people who saw the demons flying in the distance, but the orders were strict not to leave a single person alive among those caught up in the battle, and even the fleeing knights were dealt with accordingly.

The rumors spreading throughout the imperial capital were not from those who had witnessed the battle firsthand, but rather from accounts of people who had seen the demons flying and the large-scale magical attacks from afar.

The involvement of the knights in the battle had not yet been made public knowledge.

"I'm not sure about that."

It was only natural for Olivia and Adriana to say this, as they too did not know the exact details of the battle.

"Still, let's consider the situation under the assumption that the knights were annihilated on the spot."

However, there were no witnesses to the battle. I looked at Adriana.

"Do you think others might know that you two were there?"

If the nameless monastery members in other regions knew that Adriana and Olivia had been there yesterday, it would cause problems.

Everyone there had been killed in the demon ambush, so if people asked how the two of them survived, there would be no excuse to offer.

"I'm not sure…"

Olivia spoke with her lips pursed.

"I don't know about others… but the Abbot… she knows that I was with the nameless monastery members…"

Adriana said with a dark expression.

The very person who had handed Adriana over to the Riverrier Lanze.

Although she didn't know it now, once she learned of the nameless monastery's destruction at the hands of the demons, she would inevitably harbor doubts about Adriana's survival.

She would undoubtedly have to face the question of how she returned alive when everyone else had perished.

"…Senior, you must not return to the monastery."

"…I suppose."

The unfathomable situation of being under the demons' protection was a calamity in itself, no matter which investigative body learned of it.

Therefore, if Adriana had chosen to remain silent, she must not return to the monastery.

It would be better for her to be known as having died on the spot.

One could be grateful that communication and media were not well-developed in this world.

The news from the imperial capital would take a long time to reach the Artuan Monastery in the Saint-Thuan Duchy. It would take an even longer time for the news to spread to the local cities of Saint-Thuan Duchy.

As real-time information sharing wasn't possible, there was no need for Adriana to go into hiding, but it would be enough for her to live quietly somewhere far from the public eye and influence.

"Staying at the temple won't be good for you, so let's go somewhere else for now. I'll find a place for us to live."

The Rotary Club headquarters.

Under Loyar's protection for the time being, I would need to consider Adriana's living arrangements.

"What about you, junior?"

“…What indeed?"

Both of them were unaware that I belonged to an organization called the Rotary Club.

"It's a hassle to explain, so just think of it as it is."

“…Thank you, junior."

Although I didn't commit a crime, I belonged to an organization that was close to it, and there was no need to boast about it. Thus, neither of them knew my background.

Come to think of it, only Harriet, Ellen, the prince, and the princess were aware of my connection to the Rotary Club.

And maybe those three pathetic brothers who had once mocked me as a beggar.

"Let's get moving."

Keeping Adriana in the temple for too long was not a good idea.

I immediately led the two of them out of the temple.

The atmosphere in the Imperial Capital was tense.

People were bustling about, going somewhere.

“The demons have appeared…”

“We should hurry back.”

“The queue for the gate is incredibly long. It's a mess.”

“Are the demons attacking the Imperial Capital too?”

“It's possible.”

Rumors of demons appearing in the southern part of the Imperial Capital had already spread far and wide.

Since it was a festival period, the magic train, which was already packed, was even more crowded, so it wasn't even a viable option for transportation.

"We'll have to walk."

"Okay."

"That's the only choice."

The chaos was unprecedented.

It wasn't just the crowds of people roaming around to see various parts of the Imperial Capital during the festival.

With a massive movement to leave the Imperial Capital as quickly as possible, there were disturbances near the large warp gates, as well as the magic train.

“Please enter the queue in an orderly manner! There are no priorities!”

Many more soldiers than usual were controlling the queues for the gates, and it was the same for the medium and small warp gates.

“Let's get out of the Imperial Capital and come back when things calm down.”

“Yeah.”

There seemed to be quite a few people who wanted to move far away from the Imperial Capital.

It appeared they intended to return to the Imperial Capital when the chaos subsided and use the large warp gates to travel back to their hometowns.

All the tourists in the Imperial Capital were panicking due to yesterday's incident.

Cold sweat broke out.

I was afraid of the fact that my actions had such a profound impact on so many people.

I had killed Riverrier Lanze.

I still believed it was necessary, but I felt as if my every move could literally turn the world upside down.

The demons.

And the Demon King.

I truly felt the magnitude of their influence in this human world.

The Great Demon War had ended.

After that, people should have gradually forgotten about the Demon King and the demons.

“Has the Demon King… returned?”

“Don't say such unlucky things, you fool!”

“The Demon King is taking revenge! He didn't die after all! Artorius failed to kill the Demon King!”

“It can't be… it can't be true…”

However, because of my actions yesterday, people were making their own assumptions and turning them into facts.

The Demon King hadn't died.

Or, the next Demon King was taking revenge.

If not that, the remaining demons would continue to plunge the continent into chaos.

Numerous false rumors grew and multiplied as they took on a life of their own.

Fear paralyzes people's rationality.

If the demons had truly staged this attack for revenge, they should have targeted the Imperial City or the Imperial Palace, not the abandoned monastery in the southern region of the Royal Road.

However, no one speaks of this.

“If the Demon King has truly been resurrected… who will kill him?”

The concern was about who would have to kill the new Demon King in someone's stead.

Adriana and Olivia silently follow behind me. Having been saved by the demons, they must be the ones feeling the most confusion in this situation.

It took quite a while to travel on foot.

It would take more than a day or two for people to escape the crowded Royal Road like a receding tide.

Since people flocked to the side where the gate was located, the other side was relatively quiet.

"But… why did the demons… attack the Holy Knights?"

"I… don't know."

At Adriana's question, Olivia shook her head with a stern expression.

They don't know why the demons saved them, nor what their purpose was. It's too strange an event to even guess.

I, who am walking ahead, couldn't possibly reveal that I am actually the son of the Demon King and that I had used my subordinates to attack an unnamed monastery rather than the Holy Knights in order to save them.

"The demons attacked the Holy Knights last time, too."

"Yes… they did."

"Did they harbor a grudge…?"

Adriana may not know, but Olivia knows the truth about the previous attack.

The corruption and degeneration of the Holy Knights, including the demon prisoners.

She knows that the demons attacked to rescue the succubus prisoners, not to raid the unnamed monastery. It's not about revenge against the nameless monastery, but against Riverrier Lanze, the former leader of the Holy Knights.

There's no need to go that far. Riverrier Lanze, the former leader of the Holy Knights, is a war hero of the Great Demon War and, as such, is an enemy of the demons.

He is now weak and has lost his power. So, attacking him now that he has lost his power and influence could be seen as quite reasonable.

"Revenge… perhaps."

Olivia's reasoning is logical in its own way.

She understands that yesterday's incident was an attack to kill Riverrier Lanze, not the Nameless Monastery.

In reality, it's completely different.

However, if Olivia interprets the demons' intentions in that way, it's good for me.

Of course, even with that thought, rescuing Adriana and Olivia is still a strange act. Olivia murmurs as if she's realized something.

"This might be a stretch, but…"

"What is it?"

Olivia looks at Adriana and me as she speaks.

"If the demons… attacked the Holy Knights for revenge yesterday… could they have left us alone because… we're outsiders?"

"…Huh?"

Adriana tilts her head at Olivia's words.

"No, that's not it. The place itself was in a condition difficult for outsiders to be present… The only reason they went out of their way to save us… must have been to prevent targets other than the intended ones from getting hurt…"

Olivia makes a different assumption. That the attack came first, and the rescue followed.

There would be no reason to attack the Holy Knights if the purpose was to harm humans. So, attacking the Holy Knights must have been the original intent.

However, discovering outsiders there and not wanting to involve them inadvertently, she comes to the conclusion that they were rescued for that reason.

"Do demons… really care about such things?"

Adriana seemed to not understand Olivia's words, as all humans should be enemies to demons.

Her attitude was almost as if she was saying the demons were kind.

It's common sense that demons hate humans unconditionally and try to kill them. Naturally, Adriana couldn't help but harbor such thoughts.

But the demons did save them.

"Maybe… it's a bit strange."

“…I don't know either."

Neither Adriana nor Olivia.

It seemed difficult for them to overcome the deeply rooted prejudice.

Of course, rescuing the two of them was the priority, so whatever Olivia's reasoning, it must be wrong.

Therefore, seeing Olivia furrow her brow and wonder why such a thing happened yesterday only made me find it amusing.

CHAPTER 327

The Rotary Club headquarters was located in the southern part of the Imperial Capital.

It was a relatively quiet place, as it was situated in a sparsely populated area with a large expanse of land. Although it wasn't the perfect place to hide, if one were determined, they could live here without attracting any attention from outsiders.

"Can you take care of someone for me?"

"Yes, she's my senior. Her name is Adriana."

"Oh, hello there…"

Adriana greeted Loyar with a slight bow of her head.

She hadn't grown up in the Imperial Capital and didn't come from an aristocratic background. During her time at the temple, she had behaved modestly, so she would have no reason to know about someone like Irine, who had earned the nickname of a wild dog.

The same went for Olivia, who had never seen Loyar before.

Although it wasn't a completely secretive organization, only those who were involved knew the dealings of such a place.

Both of them had no choice but to see Loyar, the somewhat scruffy white-haired boss of the Rotary Club, for the first time.

Loyar, although he appeared human, exuded an aura of wildness even when he stood still.

That's why Olivia and Adriana were slightly taken aback when they saw this man, who was unlike anyone they had ever met before.

Their surprise was only amplified when they realized that I had someone like him as

a boss.

In fact, Loyar was one of the main instigators responsible for the current turmoil in the Imperial Capital.

The mastermind behind the attack on the Holy Knights: Demon King Valier.

His accomplice: Loyar of the Lycan.

Naturally, the two wouldn't recognize each other. Sarkegaar had rescued them, so Loyar was also meeting them for the first time.

"We might need to stay here for a while due to some circumstances. Is that alright?"

“…Well, it's not like it's impossible."

Loyar quickly scanned Adriana from head to toe, and she shivered as if she had been struck by electricity at his gaze.

"We don't have any empty rooms, but we can make one. However, there are only men here, you know?"

The club members had recently resumed their human forms due to improved circumstances. Despite the improvements, Loyar was the only one who still looked like a beggar.

Even so, this place was full of rough people who had experienced the vicissitudes of life, and Loyar seemed to be newly concerned about it.

"Don't worry. She's more than capable of taking care of herself."

"I suppose. If she's been trained at the temple, she might appear delicate, but she can surely throw a punch."

Loyar didn't ask about the details of their situation. He must have known that they were involved in yesterday's incident. I looked at Adriana.

As Loyar had said, now that I had brought her here, I could see that this place might be difficult for Adriana to endure.

In reality, I didn't know the disposition of every single member of the organization.

"If this place is too uncomfortable, I can try to find somewhere else for you."

"No, it's fine… Thank you, Reinhardt."

Seemingly unable to impose any further, Adriana nodded her head in agreement rather than asking about the nature of this place.

It appeared that Loyar fully understood the meaning behind Adriana needing to stay here quietly.

"Hmm… where should I arrange a room…"

Loyar seemed to ponder for a moment. She had a look on her face that said she found it to be a bothersome task.

She mentioned that there were no empty rooms, but one could be made, which seemed to imply evicting someone who was already settled.

Wasn't this a rather awkward situation?

After a brief moment of contemplation, Loyar gestured for Adriana to follow and opened the door behind her office.

-Thunk-

"Use this room."

"…?"

"?"

Loyar had just casually offered her own room, which was unmistakably hers. Not only Olivia and Adriana, but even I couldn't help but be surprised by this sudden decision.

"Um… I… I don't know what to call you… but… isn't this your room…?"

"…Sister?"

"Ah, is that… rude? Then how should I…"

At the mention of 'sister,' Loyar's eyes widened. She grabbed Adriana's hand and pulled her into the room.

"No, you must use this room."

"…Yes?"

"If you need anything, just let me know. I'll prepare it for you right away."

After saying this, Loyar placed her hands on Adriana's shoulders.

"Also, from now on, keep calling me 'sister.'"

Loyar seemed to be quite fond of Adriana calling her 'sister' at their first meeting, considering she had always been called 'auntie' by Ellen.

"Ah… Yes, sister."

"Heh."

It seemed as if Loyar's nonexistent tail was vigorously swishing back and forth.

Clearly, her training had gone awry after constantly being called 'auntie' by Ellen.

Although Ellen had kept nagging Loyar, who eventually gave in to being called 'auntie,' it was a good thing.

I was worried about leaving Adriana alone in such a strict place, but for now, this was the best option. Adriana was someone who couldn't be exposed to the outside world at the moment.

On the way back after entrusting Adriana to the club's headquarters, Olivia blankly stared at the sky and muttered,

"What is this world coming to…?"

"I didn't think everything would be fine once the Demon King was killed."

"…"

"But, I thought the senseless deaths of countless people being dragged into the battlefield would end…"

Having witnessed the horrors of war firsthand, Olivia knew better than anyone how terrifying it was.

Olivia didn't know about the revolutionary forces.

However, she was aware that the conflict between the Five Great Religions and the Empire was escalating, fanning the flames of war.

"I wonder if there wouldn't be humans killing each other if the Demon King hadn't died."

It seemed Olivia wished that at least some of the rumors about the Demon King were true.

An external enemy always halted internal strife. Olivia seemed to reluctantly acknowledge the necessity of the Demon King to some extent.

"Don't go around telling people I said this. It's a strange thing for me to say."

Olivia looked at me and smiled.

"What's the use of me saying that?"

Adriana would only be temporarily entrusted to the Rotary Club, and another arrangement would soon need to be found. The Imperial Capital wasn't entirely safe, after all.

Perhaps a faraway place.

Somewhere like the Edina Archipelago, where Airi resided, would be a relief.

Even if I sent her there, how would I explain my connection to that distant island nation? It seemed hard enough to accept what happened today.

"By the way, Reinhardt, what exactly was that place today?"

Olivia, too, seemed to have the same question and asked me about the Rotary Club.

"It's like a hometown for those who come from the streets."

I briefly explained the Rotary Club and how I came to be involved with it from my time in the beggar organization.

"I see… That's a good thing."

Upon hearing that the beggars who once lived under the bridge were now living in decent buildings and earning their keep, Olivia smiled brightly.

Although the boss, Loyar, still looked like a beggar.

"I thought you were involved in some sort of criminal organization, Reinhardt."

Although I had been involved with such organizations in the past, and it wasn't entirely unrelated to the Thieves Guild, I didn't correct Olivia's assumption.

After all, I was now officially doing business through collaboration with the Merchant Guild, and if we were to look at my background, it was connected to the royal family.

"Haah…"

Olivia sighed, seemingly weighed down by her worries.

With both Adriana's problems and her own, she must have had a lot on her mind. With Riverrier Lanze dead, there probably weren't any more schemers aiming to make Olivia Lanze the Queen, but one could never be too sure. Considering the issue with the demons on top of that, things were bound to be complicated.

Moreover, Olivia didn't win the tournament, nor was she elected Miss Temple.

Needing money, Olivia had become entangled in various matters, and she ended up missing out on everything she wanted.

One way or another, she had experienced nothing but hardships during this festival.

She must have been under a lot of stress for other reasons, but ultimately, the money issue was tormenting Olivia as well.

I couldn't solve all of Olivia's problems.

However, I wanted to provide her with at least some support.

"You know, that thing."

"What thing?"

"The orphanage that your senior sponsors."

"Ah…"

"Is that in the Imperial Capital?"

"Ah… Yeah, that's right."

"Let's go there sometime."

Upon hearing my suggestion, Olivia's eyes widened in surprise.

"No, no, Reinhardt! You don't have to do that. It's my problem… You don't need to spend money on it…"

"Who said I'm spending money?"

"…What?"

She seemed to think that I was going to cover the sponsorship fee she couldn't afford. Of course, it's natural for her to think that.

But unfortunately, I had no intention of spending money.

"I'm not going to donate. I just want to visit."

"Oh? Ah… Okay."

Hesitating, Olivia led the way.

Olivia personally sponsored several orphanages.

First of all, it was not just one place.

Olivia had been sponsoring institutions with the allowance she received from Riverrier Lanze, but as her financial situation grew difficult, it became nearly impossible for her to continue providing the funds.

That meant Olivia must have been supporting only those institutions that were in dire financial straits. She wouldn't be sponsoring every place, including those with enough resources.

Places that struggled to operate without Olivia's financial aid.

"There are two more places besides this one?"

"Yes."

I was standing in front of an orphanage building located in a quiet area on the eastern outskirts of the Imperial Capital.

The building wasn't crumbling, but it was old and the facilities looked quite outdated.

However, the site itself was quite large, with children playing in a central courtyard surrounded by three buildings.

There was no fence around the orphanage, so the children could see us approaching.

“Oh? It's big sister!”

“Sister is here!”

“Sister Olivia!”

"Ah… hey, kids."

It seemed Olivia had visited frequently, as the children flocked to her.

"Sister, my leg is all better now!"

"Ah, Billy, I'm glad to hear that."

Olivia was tending to each child as they eagerly told her various things.

She seemed to be someone who knew how to love children.

"Sister! That kid fought with Will again! Scold him!"

"Really? You, didn't I tell you not to fight with your friends?"

"But he started it! He called me an orphan without a mom! And he doesn't have one either!"

"I do have one, dummy! My mom's just busy and can't come visit!"

"Ha! I know where your mom's grave is!"

"You jerk!"

"You! Didn't I tell you not to say harsh things?"

But the children's conversation seemed to be filled with words that stabbed at each other's hearts…

Right.

Children tend to be surprisingly harsh…

Amid the children's bickering, Olivia's unfamiliar side was revealed as she scolded, stopped, and comforted them.

I had thought she might be like this, but it was still intriguing to see it in person.

The children's attention on Olivia was short-lived.

They began focusing on me.

"Who's this guy, though?"

"Is he your boyfriend, sister?"

"Uh? No, no… He's my junior. A close junior."

Olivia's face turned red as she vehemently shook her head.

Her reaction was completely different from usual. I thought she would just say, "Of course, he's my boyfriend!" while laughing, but instead, she was visibly embarrassed.

Why is her personality different here?

"Sister, you must like this brother, huh? Your face is all red."

"Uh? Uhm? No, no. That's not it. You're trying to tease me, huh?"

As Olivia stuttered, the girls giggled delightedly, while the boys started giving me cold stares.

I could tell just by their looks.

Who the hell are you?

Though I didn't know the exact words, their gazes carried similar meanings.

"What are you, an older brother?"

"Do you attend the temple too?"

"Are you good at fighting?"

I found myself in a difficult situation amidst the hostile gazes of the young boys.

Even my classmates were already like children to me, let alone these even younger ones.

Even if Olivia didn't know, I neither liked children nor knew how to handle them.

Children were beings far removed from me.

As I stood there stiffly, saying nothing, the children began to whisper among

themselves.

“He must be good at fighting.”

“He looks scary.”

“No, I heard that guys who look like that are actually bad at fighting.”

It was overwhelming.

I didn't come here to see children.

Would it be only boys?

The girls were also whispering.

“That guy is totally my type.”

“You want to be eaten alive by his face? He looks like a thug. Those guys use up girls and then toss them away, right? A man should have lots of money. Money is the best.”

“He might have a lot of money, you never know.”

“No, he's naturally poor. Look at his face.”

“So you'd marry a fat, bald, old man as long as he has money?”

“Actually, that's better. He'll die quickly, right? Then all the money would be mine.”

“…Really?”

“Then all I need to do is hook up with a handsome guy like him, you dummy.”

“…You'd marry again?”

“Why not marry three times?”

These children with particularly mature mannerisms were having conversations that even my classmates wouldn't have.

What's with these kids?

“But that guy is really my type…”

“Asera, he's a man, isn't he?”

“You don't like him, sister.”

“Sigh, idiot. Of course, it's a lie.”

What the heck?

What do children see and learn to become so twisted at such a young age?

I didn't come here to play. I tried to ignore their whispers as much as possible while I observed the children's appearance.

Worn-out clothes.

Although not tattered, I could tell they weren't in an environment with many spare clothes.

The children were all skinny overall.

Their nutritional status seemed to be poor.

It definitely felt like an orphanage with poor conditions.

If the sponsorship money decreases even a little, it would have a significant impact, so I understood why Olivia tried to maintain the sponsorship after seeing this situation.

"Oh my, Olivia. It's been a while."

"Ah, yes, teacher."

A middle-aged woman in a white dress came out to the yard, seemingly wondering who had arrived with the children swarming around.

She had a kind-hearted appearance. She greeted Olivia and then naturally turned her

gaze to me.

"Ah, Reinhardt. Let me introduce you. This is Ms. Bell, the director of Sun Cradle Orphanage."

"Hello, I'm Olivia's friend…?"

"Yes, my name is Reinhardt."

She extended her hand, and I shook it. Her hand was soft.

Of course, she wouldn't be managing the place alone, and there were several other adults around.

The director of Sun Cradle Orphanage.

I neither liked children nor knew how to deal with them. I didn't know how to interact with them or what to do. I would be grateful if I could just avoid making them cry.

I didn't come here to see the children.

Nor did I come to provide sponsorship money.

I looked at Olivia and spoke.

"Senior, could you take the children over there for a bit?"

“…Huh?"

"I have something to discuss with the director."

Olivia, looking slightly puzzled, led the children away towards another area. Like the Pied Piper, the children, boys and girls alike, followed Olivia wherever she went.

The director who introduced herself as Bell.

"Ah, Reinhardt. Do you have something to discuss with me?"

"Yes. First, let's find a quiet place."

As it wasn't a conversation to be held in a public place, I followed Director Bell into her office.

It was a place where no one would overhear.

"What would you like to discuss, Reinhardt?"

In front of Bell, who had a kind smile on her face, I smirked.

"Explain yourself."

“…Pardon?"

"Which hole are you pouring the support funds down that the children are in this state?"

Following the Great Demon War, the royal family immediately began providing maximum support for orphanage projects for war orphans.

"The children should be receiving enough funds that they don't have to worry about food, so why are they living like this?"

A lack of support funds?

I knew there was no way such a thing could happen at an orphanage in the imperial capital, of all places.

CHAPTER 328

One cannot distinguish between the goodness and evilness of a person based on their appearance alone. At first glance, the person before your eyes may seem as if they couldn't even hurt an ant, but in reality, they might be an evil spirit who sucks the blood of children.

Teacher Bell's expression seemed genuinely flustered.

"I, I don't know what you're talking about. Why would you suddenly bring up such a topic…?"

Naturally, she would deny it.

"I don't know the structure of the orphanage support program, nor do I know the route and method through which the funds are provided. There's no way I can know. I'm not even an official involved in it."

I let out a deep sigh.

After the victory in the Great Demon War, the government immediately began supporting the multitude of orphans that had emerged.

In fact, when I had first arrived in the Imperial Capital, I seriously considered whether I should just enter an orphanage-like place. I knew for certain that support would begin in that area.

It was also said that war orphans with talent would be able to enter the Temple for free education, even if they weren't of the Royal Class.

So, it doesn't make sense for there to be orphanage children in the Imperial Capital who lack money, clothes, and food.

Somehow, they're being deprived of these necessities.

It's certain that the things that should rightfully go to the children are being leaked somewhere in the middle.

The places that Olivia sponsors all suffer from this kind of leak, and the places that actually need help aren't receiving it.

When I heard this story from Olivia, I didn't say anything about her sponsorship itself, but I had already grasped that there might be something like this going on.

Now that I thought about it, I decided to take action.

Looking at Teacher Bell, who wore an expression of injustice, I crossed my arms.

I don't know how the orphanage program operates.

This person might actually be innocent.

"Teacher, did you know that I won the first-year championship in this Temple Tournament?"

"What does that have to do with…?"

"The winners of the Temple Tournament have the opportunity to meet His Majesty the Emperor."

"!"

Seeing Teacher Bell's face turn pale, I smiled mischievously.

"What do you think would happen if I told His Majesty the Emperor that the orphanage seems to be embezzling the support funds and redirecting them elsewhere?"

"Wh-What are you talking about? Do you think we'd be safe if you said such a thing?"

"If you're innocent, you'd be safe."

"What are you saying, student? I-I never… I have absolutely…"

Teacher Bell's face grew pale and she began to tremble. The Emperor might issue an order upon hearing this story, or he might not.

However, just the fact that I mentioned it was enough to scare this person.

An innocent person might be accused of a crime they didn't commit. Then, a guilty person would undoubtedly be exposed.

Could this person truly be innocent?

Just looking at her expression, which seemed as if she might suffocate at any moment, I knew that she had been playing games with the children's food.

"Ha, please, spare me just once. Ha, just once… This will never happen again…"

-Whack!

"Argh!"

I shook off the principal, who clung to my hem.

"Why should I be the one to decide whether you live or die?"

I looked down at the trembling middle-aged woman with a seemingly kind face lying on the ground.

How many people had been deceived by that facade?

I had no idea what she had done with the money that should have gone to the children.

All the money Olivia had raised by selling her personal belongings must have been stolen this way, and if she had received prize money and donated it to the orphanage, that too must have been embezzled.

"It's the imperial law that decides that, not me."

Outside the window, the children and Olivia were playing, laughing heartily.

I was in the principal's office, watching the orphanage principal kneeling before me.

I didn't think Olivia needed to know about this.

I didn't want Olivia to find out that what she had been doing all this time was actually benefiting the wrong person.

She was already struggling so much.

I didn't want to burden her further with such a matter.

—---

After briefly watching Olivia and the children play, we left the orphanage.

The children were sad to see us go, and the principal didn't dare come anywhere near me.

"What did you talk about?"

"Oh, just some discussions about when the support policy would start and stuff like that."

"Hmm, really? I hope it starts soon."

It had already been implemented long ago. The principal had been deceiving Olivia and the other sponsors by claiming that they had been omitted from the list of recipients.

I decided there was no need to inform her of this fact. I didn't even know how much despair she would feel if she found out. The sense of betrayal would be immense.

There's no need to know every truth.

There are times when you're better off not knowing a truth that would only hurt you, and Olivia had already been hurt too much.

Even if I don't punish her myself, I can at least report her. I don't know what punishment everyone will receive, but I intend to look into the other orphanages that Olivia sponsors as well.

If Olivia's wish is for the children to be well-fed and clothed, then that will soon be the case.

"Reinhardt, you know, the kids were really struggling."

“…I don't like kids."

"Huh, I didn't know you had such a weakness."

"Why is disliking something a weakness?"

"It's a weakness. Normally, you would have just shouted 'shoo!' or something and chased them away, but you couldn't do anything."

There was no way she couldn't notice since I was just stuttering instead of shooing them away with my usual harsh words.

"Heh, you better play nice with our child, okay?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

Olivia, laughing heartily, seemed to be in a much better mood.

That was enough.

"Here, eat."

-Flinch

"…?"

"It's for humans to eat."

"I, I know that…"

Lydia Schmitt cautiously accepted the bread and milk offered by the vampire and set them down beside her.

Although the vampire had given her the food to eat, Lydia could not bring herself to touch it.

Lydia Schmitt huddled and shivered in a corner of the semi-basement.

The vampire had calmly left and returned from somewhere.

She could have tried to escape, but the fear that the vampire would not let her get away so easily prevented her from even attempting it.

'Well, at least she's not a foolish child. That's a relief.'

The vampire, who had bought the bread and milk, even carefully stroked Lydia's head as if acknowledging that she had not tried to escape.

Everything frightened Lydia, but what terrified her most was that it was broad daylight.

"How can a vampire… during the day…"

It was common knowledge that vampires only moved at night.

Yesterday, she had been disguised as an ordinary merchant, and the battle had taken place at night.

But now, the vampire was confidently roaming around during the clear daylight.

The vampire had even gone out and bought bread and milk.

The vampire smiled, watching the astonished Lydia.

"There's no such thing as an absolute in this world, is there?"

It was an unintentionally gentle smile. It seemed as if the vampire, with her eerie gaze and harsh words from the day before, who had used a series of massive, never-before-seen destructive spells, had disappeared.

Standing before her was a vampire sorcerer capable of slaughtering tens of thousands with a mere gesture.

Reinhardt, who commanded a sorcerer of such caliber as a subordinate.

The Demon King.

Lydia now knew that Reinhardt was such a being.

She did not know why the Demon King was the master of Tiamata.

All she could hope for now was that, out of fear, they would kill her without turning her into a vampire.

What did this vampire want to do with her?

Lydia didn't know. All she could do was pray to the gods for a peaceful death.

The vampire observed her closely.

"Hmm… are you cold?"

"…"

"It's winter, so it's chilly… and there's no heating…"

The vampire touched the floor and cocked her head.

Snap!

A heat source was summoned, and warmth began to circulate throughout the chilly room.

"How is it? Is it warm?"

"…"

Lydia could only shrink back even more.

What did they want from her? She knew nothing. All she could do was tremble in fear, unable to understand what the terrifying vampire wanted to make of her.

The vampire sighed deeply, then stared at Lydia.

"Don't be so scared. If you need anything, just let me know."

"…"

As if to say not to be afraid, the vampire sat down beside her and supported Lydia's trembling shoulders.

"I understand that you're scared given the situation, but you don't have to be so terrified."

"…"

"I won't hurt you, so you don't have to worry."

The kinder the vampire was to Lydia, the more her fear intensified.

"Wh-what do you want… from me…?"

Having conquered her fear, Lydia gathered her courage and asked. The vampire cocked its head at her question.

"Nothing?"

"Then… why are you… keeping me like this?"

"Because you don't want to become a part of our family or kin, and our king doesn't trust you yet."

Lydia Schmidt looked at Eleris with a face full of despair.

"Can't you… just kill me… in a normal way?"

Now that Lydia knew Reinhardt's identity, she couldn't even come up with an argument in her defense.

She, who feared becoming a vampire, had betrayed her comrades in the Holy Order.

Regardless of whether the Demon King was an apostle of Tu'an, her sins were deep.

That's why Lydia, drowning in guilt, now only wished for a clean death.

"I wouldn't like that, so I can't."

Was she destined to be trapped in this dark underground forever? To remain like this until she agreed to become a vampire, unable to die?

Had she become a human being farmed by a vampire?

Seeing Lydia's expression, Eleris seemed to understand something and lowered her head.

"You can't go back to the temple, but you can at least go outside. Of course, wherever you go, you must be with me."

"…?"

"Some people might recognize you, so I'll alter your appearance a bit. If you want to go somewhere or eat something, just say so. If you want a change of scenery, we can teleport to faraway places. Don't worry about the distance."

Lydia Schmidt thought this vampire was strange.

"You can visit your family if you have any. Of course, I'll have to watch from nearby. You'll understand that much, right?"

"N-no… I don't have… any family…"

"Ah, I see. I'm sorry."

"N-no… it's… fine…"

Was this really her fate?

Lydia felt as if she might have made a huge mistake.

The vampire before her.

And Reinhardt.

Lydia couldn't understand what was happening at all.

In the central Imperial Palace Tetra of the Eredian Empire.

After finishing an urgent meeting with the ministers, the Emperor sat in his study with the Crown Prince and Princess before him.

Bertus and Charlotte didn't engage in their usual mind games.

They knew it was not an ordinary situation.

Now was not the time to go against the Emperor's mood.

"Last night, Riverrier Lanze was found dead along with several elite Holy Knights in an abandoned monastery on the outskirts of the southern imperial region."

Emperor Nelliod de Gardias calmly relayed the facts.

"It is believed to have been the work of the demon race."

"Is it related to… the incident that occurred before?"

At Bertus's question, the Emperor nodded.

It was impossible to say for certain, but the situation suggested that there could be no other explanation.

The Great Demon War had ended, but powerful demons still survived. They were formidable enough to launch a large-scale attack on the Imperial Capital.

Last time, there were no casualties, but this time, there were.

Riverrier Lanze, the former commander of the Holy Knights and one of the heroes of the Great Demon War, had died.

But the Emperor, Empress, and Prince all wore strange expressions on their faces.

“…Are the Gods helping our Empire?"

At the Emperor's words, both Charlotte and Bertus trembled but could only nod in agreement.

The appearance of high-ranking demons in the Imperial Capital was a calamity, but the three of them knew that, in the long run, this situation was a blessing in disguise.

"Did those who died at that location include not only Riverrier Lanze but also the nameless religious leaders of the Nameless Monastery?"

"I can't say for certain about the exact composition, but that seems to be the case."

The Emperor nodded again in response to Charlotte's question.

The royal family had already grasped the existence of the Nameless Monastery, a secret religious organization formed by Riverrier Lanze.

However, the situation was delicate, as there was no telling when the religious world would explode, and they couldn't take action against the Order.

Assassination was difficult. Riverrier Lanze himself was an exceptional fighter, and the leaders of the Nameless Order were battle-hardened veterans.

Even if they succeeded in assassinating them, it would be obvious that the royal family was behind it.

Thus, the Imperial family had been pondering how to deal with the growing seeds of division without resorting to any action.

And then, in a single night, they were wiped out.

Furthermore, numerous civilians had seen flying demons in the vicinity. The royal family could not be suspected of being behind it, nor could they be accused of being so.

Although the appearance of the surviving demon forces was a disaster, the Empire had gained without lifting a finger.

"Do you understand why the demons attacked Riverrier Lanze instead of the Holy Knights?"

"Other than personal grudges against Riverrier Lanze… I'm not sure."

Bertus could only make such an inference.

"More importantly, I think it's crucial to determine whether the demons knew about the Nameless Monastery and attacked them."

"If they knew, they should have left them alone to weaken the Empire…"

"Exactly."

If the demons knew the purpose of the Nameless Monastery, it would be in their best interest to leave them alone to weaken the Empire. Therefore, they could not have known about it, and that conclusion was reasonable.

There was no way they could assume that the demons were trying to protect the Empire, so even the heart of the Empire could not comprehend the true nature of the situation.

Thus, they were left in the dark.

The old problem had been removed, but it had been replaced with another issue.

Powerful demons still survived and could attack the Imperial Capital at any time.

It was impossible to tell whether the Demon King had truly been resurrected or if there was a successor to the throne.

However, everyone in the Empire had come to realize that the Great Demon War was not yet over.

They knew that this would have a positive effect on the Empire for the time being.

After attending to the Emperor, in a corridor on one side of the Central Palace, Tetra.

Bertus and Charlotte were walking through the corridor, preparing to leave the Central Palace.

"What do you think, sister?"

“…About what?"

"The possibility of that child you're looking for being involved in this."

"I don't want to hear such nonsense."

Despite saying that, Charlotte's mind was also in turmoil.

"What if that kid turns out to be the son of the Demon King or something like that…"

"Shut up."

Charlotte glared at Bertus with a grim expression.

"What are you trying to say? I'm the one who ended up living with the son of the Demon King. So this whole situation is because of me. Do you want to say something like that? That I should have just died by your hands? Are you trying to say something like that?"

At Charlotte's hostile words, Bertus smiled and lowered his head.

"No? I just wanted to say that it would be such a relief if that were the case. I almost made a fatal mistake, didn't I?"

There's no meaning in competition without the Empire.

Seeing his evil-filled expression, Charlotte felt like she was going to be sick.

Someone had to hear this conversation. But there was no one to listen to it.

Even if someone did hear it, nothing would change.

"…You're such an unlucky bastard."

Bertus's words, wishing that the child was rather the son of the Demon King or something similar, were understandable.

Charlotte knew what he was thinking.

Even if the remnants of the demons remained, they couldn't bring down the Empire. Dark Land had been effectively destroyed, and the Demon King's Castle had been captured.

The remaining demons couldn't do more than guerrilla warfare.

So, if a rallying point for the surviving demons emerged to cause a disturbance, the Empire might face chaos, but it wouldn't split apart.

Bertus was hoping for the existence of the Demon King's successor from that perspective.

Charlotte knew that too.

This situation, though incomprehensible, was ultimately good for the Empire.

Could that child really be related to the Demon King?

Despite that possibility, the child seemed to have no abilities and was exceedingly ordinary.

However, Charlotte knew that she couldn't completely deny that possibility.

CHAPTER 329

Immediate action was taken in the Imperial Capital.

Though the festival itself had ended, the Temple, which was supposed to remain open until the end of the weekend, began controlling the number of visitors at once, and immediate measures were implemented throughout the entire Imperial Capital.

As the military controlled all the gates of the Imperial Capital, efforts were underway to restore order.

Of course, since all these events were taking place outside the Temple, it felt to me as if the remaining day of the Temple festival had ended a little earlier than planned.

"It's quiet."

"Yes, it is."

Ellen and I were strolling through the now peaceful Temple once again.

Even though she had been elected Miss Temple, Ellen was still just Ellen.

Nothing had changed significantly, and it seemed that she didn't place much importance on it. If anything, she found it bothersome.

The festival was over.

Since the tournament was over, he would have an audience with the emperor, but given the circumstances, there might not be an opportunity for that to happen.

The issue of embezzlement of orphanage support funds would be resolved later.

Although she couldn't participate in the contest, Ellen became Miss Temple, and Cliffman said he made it into the rankings.

I'm not sure if his self-confidence or motion sickness problem was resolved.

It seemed like Liana scolded him for not being able to win like Ellen did.

Could this be, instead of recovering from motion sickness, he just gained a responsible bully?

There was also the matter of Lydia Schmitt.

Lydia Schmitt was missing. Regardless of her impending graduation, Lydia Schmitt was still a Temple student and an Unrestricted tournament winner.

The issue of her disappearance would soon come to light.

Eleris, who was holding her, would take measures, but Lydia Schmitt was a member of the Nameless Monastery. She would undoubtedly be a key witness in this case.

For now, I could only hope that Eleris would keep her well hidden.

So,

"It's vacation time."

"Yeah, it is."

Winter vacation had begun.

Although the royal family would be in turmoil, I had completed my task of killing Riverrier Lanze.

"What are you going to do during this break?"

Ellen looked at me and asked.

"Well, I don't have anywhere to go, so I guess I'll stay at the Temple."

There's a lot to do.

Negotiations with the Vampire Council.

Re-establishing contact with the Black Order.

Gathering information on Cantus Magna.

Deciding Adriana's whereabouts.

Contacting and taking action against the revolutionary forces.

Although it's not my responsibility, there's also the work of the Magic Research Society.

Rather, I felt like I had been postponing things that I couldn't do during the semester for after the break, so even if I couldn't tell her, I was busier now than ever.

Ellen walked quietly beside me.

"I'm going home."

“…Home?"

"Yes, home."

Naturally, Ellen's parents were alive and well. She hadn't been able to go home all year, so it seemed like she wanted to go back during this winter break.

I hadn't set up the details of Ellen's family background or such matters. Ellen was neither a noble nor a commoner.

Hero Ragan Artorius was an adventurer who grew up in an ordinary family in an ordinary village.

And so, Ellen, the younger sister, was also a girl raised in an ordinary family in an ordinary village.

Ellen was already a girl of few words, but she never spoke about her hometown. Of course, it wasn't that she didn't want to talk about it, but more that she didn't see any reason to bring it up.

To begin with, I never asked her about it either.

If I started asking her about it, she would ask me questions in return, and then I'd have nothing to say. So, I intentionally didn't ask her.

Anyway, if she goes back home, she'll be with her family after a long time. Is she planning to stay there for the entire vacation?

“…When will you be back?"

"I don't know."

It seemed she had no thoughts or plans beyond going back and spending time with her family.

Does she intend to return when the new school year starts after the vacation?

That would be a few months, right?

Even if she returns in March, that's two months without her at the temple.

“…Why?"

I don't know what my expression was, but Ellen tilted her head as she looked at me.

"Do you wish I came back sooner?"

No, it's not that!

Why are you suddenly asking that?!

Do you have any idea how that makes me feel?

Do you think I'll miss you if I don't see you for a long time?

You look at me with such a piercing gaze.

You…

You really…

“…Yeah."

In the end, I said it with a feeling of being sick and dying.

No.

I would worry if I didn't see you for too long.

Even if you're staying at home, you never know what could happen to a person.

Isn't that right?

It's not because I might miss you without you here.

It won't be… probably.

Ellen seemed to ponder for a moment before tilting her head again.

"Then, do you want to come with me?"

“…What?"

"To my house. Do you want to come with me?"

Once again, I was speechless at her sudden question.

Is she asking me to go with her because she thinks she'll miss me while I'm not around?

What does she mean by that…?

Now, I don't even know what's going on between her and me…

Although I told her I had nothing to do, I had no words for her invitation to go with her.

I had no right to say why I would go there, considering I had entered Arunaria without Harriet, too.

"If you don't want to, that's fine."

Ellen continued walking calmly. She didn't seem angry or anything like that…

She's not angry, right? Her lips usually pout when she's angry, but she doesn't seem

like that now.

But still.

Meeting Ellen's parents…

The parents of Hero Ragan Artorius.

It did pique my curiosity.

I just casually set up the characters as a hero and the hero's younger sister, without needing to explain what their parents were like.

Who could their parents be to have both their children turn out to be monsters?

No, leaving that aside, I'm just…

I'm curious about the environment Ellen grew up in.

However, I had so much to do during this vacation.

I couldn't afford to be away.

“…I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?"

There's no reason to apologize for not going with her.

It seemed as if Ellen was okay with it, and she shrugged her shoulders.

Adriana had been bewildered these past few days.

Of course, it was quite different from the embarrassment she experienced while being held captive by the Nameless Monastery.

"Hey, do you need anything?"

"No… I'm fine, sister."

After Reinhardt had left, the mysterious leader of the organization seemed to be constantly hovering around her whenever she had a spare moment.

"Heh. If you need anything, just let me know. I'm always here."

At the top floor of the building, she lounged on the sofa in a place that could be called her office, doing nothing. Adriana spent the entire day in the room behind her.

"But if you give me a room… where do you sleep, sister? Last time, you slept on the floor…"

"Me? I don't really care about that sort of thing."

She barely used her own room, only staying near the office.

Just yesterday, Adriana was startled when she went to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

She saw the boss, who had given her a room, sprawled out on the floor of the office, fast asleep.

Giving her a room, and sleeping on the floor.

Shocked, Adriana told her not to sleep in such a place, but the boss simply scratched her belly and said, "I always sleep like this," before lying back down.

She didn't seem like a bad person.

Adriana felt strange every time Loyar, a person of a type she had never seen before, hovered around her.

'What are you doing?'

'Don't you get bored?'

'Want to go for a walk?'

'Don't you want to eat something?'

'Are you comfortable here?'

Whenever she tried to meditate in her room, Loyar would keep circling around her and striking up a conversation.

Adriana didn't find this annoying.

Rather, Loyar's constant circling and curiosity reminded her of a puppy.

Knowing that it was impolite to think so, Adriana couldn't help but imagine a large dog circling around her. Loyar's behavior was oddly endearing, and Adriana felt strange every time she saw her disheveled boss.

'What kind of person is she…?'

Adriana didn't know what kind of place this was, nor why the boss looked the shabbiest of all.

While the others wore decent clothes and kept themselves clean,

Loyar always looked unkempt, her hair sticking out in every direction, like a dog that had been out in the rain and hadn't bathed.

Adriana had lived in a monastery.

Her life focused on self-cultivation, personal care was a given, and she was extremely strict about cleanliness and keeping her surroundings tidy.

Having lived the neat life of a monk, Adriana realized for the first time that she had a strange compulsion when it came to Loyar.

Regardless of who Loyar was,

and how scary she might be,

it was unbearable to see someone living in such a state.

"Um… Sister."

"Huh? What? What's wrong?"

As Loyar quickly approached, Adriana stepped back, slightly startled.

"Um… How about taking a bath…?"

"A bath? Why?"

"Well, it… it looks nice when it's clean… and… it doesn't smell weird… don't you think? Oh, no! I don't mean you smell weird! I, I just… thought it might not be good for your health…"

Loyar tilted her head, then sniffed her arm.

"Does it smell? This is just my body odor."

"No, that can't be your body odor… Um, um."

Claiming that there was no smell was a lie.

But Adriana couldn't bring herself to say that it smelled like a wet dog, so she pursed her lips.

Adriana's moment of hesitation on what to say didn't last long.

"Then I'll just wash, right?"

With that, Loyar hurried off somewhere.

"…"

When Adriana saw the white-haired woman reappear, her wet hair dripping water, she stared at Loyar.

"I washed. Does it still smell?"

It was obvious that she had merely splashed water on herself.

Worse still, she was still wearing the same soggy clothes. And yet, she claimed to have washed, so it should be fine.

Adriana felt as if something important inside her had been shattered.

She thought she could understand, to some extent, why Reinhardt sometimes charged in without thinking like a madman.

So this was what it felt like.

Smack!

"Ouch?"

"Follow me."

Adriana began to drag a bewildered Loyar along.

Splash!

“I, I don't like this smell!”

“What do you want me to do if you don't like the smell of soap!”

“Eek! Don't apply it! It's slippery!”

“Just stay still for a moment!”

The members of the Rotary Club all craned their necks at the sounds coming from the shower room.

"What's going on?"

"You know, the lady Reinhardt brought in a while ago."

"What about her?"

"It seems like she's trying to wash the boss."

"The boss?"

“Come here, will you!”

“No! I said no! I'm leaving!”

“Where are you going, naked like that?! Get back here quickly!”

Thud!

The club members passing by in the corridor all gaped.

Someone was actually trying to forcibly wash their leader, who was as stubborn as a wild dog. From the sounds of it, it seemed like the boss was the one being caught, not Adriana.

Their boss hated anything bothersome, and washing or changing clothes was also very annoying to her.

She would claim to have washed after just dabbing water on her face.

“Stop it! I said stop!”

“Are you coming or not?”

And now, this mysterious lady from the temple was forcibly washing Loyar. Loyar made noises like a dog being caught, trying to avoid it, but in the end, she was captured and forced to be washed, groaning all the while.

"It seems the Temple really is something."

"You're right. The boss can't even budge."

Everyone commented on how amazing the Temple must be, each adding their own remark as they passed by.

Washing a large dog gone crazy was a grueling task. Naturally, the one doing the washing would end up drenched.

Adriana was soaked, from her hair to her clothes. Of course, the washed subject, Loyar, had changed into new clothes, and her wet hair was being diligently dried with a towel by Adriana.

"See? It feels so much better when you're clean."

“…Does it?"

Loyar looked at his reflection in the mirror with a sullen expression.

After drying her disheveled hair well, Adriana began to carefully comb through Loyar's hair with a brush.

Loyar didn't know about anything else, but the feeling of the brush gently scratching her scalp and hair was pleasant, so she closed her eyes and surrendered herself to Adriana's touch.

The tangled and scruffy white hair was reborn under Adriana's hands.

Of course, since it hadn't been maintained at all, it wasn't silky and shiny like fine silk, but it was no longer sticking out in all directions like an unkempt wild dog.

"From now on, please wash yourself regularly."

"Uh… I don't know."

Loyar tapped her own head.

"Comb my hair some more."

"…”

In the end, Adriana combed her hair for quite some time.

Upon seeing Loyar looking like a human for the first time, the club members were dumbfounded.

“She actually looks like a person.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

"What are you guys talking about?!"

Everyone agreed that she indeed looked like a person, nodding blankly.

Tourists throughout the Imperial Road were quickly evacuated under control. The sense of crisis still lingered in the air, but the chaotic atmosphere gradually subsided.

The Imperial family had no choice but to make an announcement to prevent indiscriminate rumors from spreading among the people.

Demons appeared in the southern region of the Imperial Road and massacred the former Holy Knight Commander, Riverrier Lanze, and other believers of the Five Great Churches, who were holding a gathering in a nearby abandoned monastery.

The identity of the attacking demons was unclear, and the Imperial family was investigating the incident with all their efforts.

Although it was an emergency situation, people should not be confused by baseless rumors related to the Demon King.

In summary, the announcement from the Imperial family went like this.

There was no lie in the content. There was no reason to mix falsehoods.

In a situation where a large-scale rebellion might erupt if they clashed with the Five Great Church forces, the demons had taken the heat off for them.

The animosity of the Five Great Churches toward the Empire would now be redirected toward the demons.

At that moment, I was sitting quietly in the dim underground waterway.

With a small bonfire lit.

-Splash

Someone appeared in the distance, accompanied by the sound of footsteps.

The figure that revealed itself was Count Argon Ponteus.

Sarkegaar.

"Have you arrived?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Sit down."

"Yes."

Sarkegaar sat down opposite me.

It wasn't long before Eleris revealed herself out of thin air.

"Where's Lydia?"

"She's in my room. Don't worry, she won't run away."

Eleris quietly sat down next to the bonfire as well.

I had called all of my subordinates to the place that used to be a base for the Rotary Club, as we had to discuss the recent incident and some other matters.

Once Loyar arrived, we could start the conversation.

After waiting for some time, someone appeared with the sound of footsteps.

"…?"

"?"

"What's going on?"

Upon seeing the person who revealed themselves, the three of us couldn't help but tilt our heads in confusion.

"…?"

With all of us displaying bewildered expressions, the person who had arrived tilted their head too.

"Loyar…?"

"It doesn't seem like it."

White hair wasn't that common.

It was indeed Loyar, but she was so different from her usual self that the three of us couldn't help but be taken aback.

Usually, Loyar looked like a beggar, so people tended to keep their distance when she approached. But now, Loyar's attire and hair looked perfectly fine.

No.

Did Loyar always look like that?

Surprisingly, she looked quite decent, didn't she?

"Did you wash?"

In response to Eleris's question, Loyar nodded her head.

"Is there a problem with that?"

"But why?"

Sarkegaar and Eleris were astonished just because Loyar had washed and changed her clothes.

Loyar.

What kind of life have you been living?

And why did you wash?

It's absurd that someone would be surprised by something as simple as washing.

Loyar slumped down.

"The child entrusted to me by His Highness washed me."

“…Adriana?"

"Yes."

The feeling of hearing someone confidently admit they were washed by someone else was quite odd.

Is she actually a dog or something?

CHAPTER 330

Had Adriana and Loyar become close enough for her to give her a bath?

Loyar did seem to like Adriana.

"You look good. You should maintain this appearance more often. I couldn't stand the constant smell of a wet dog."

With a grin, Eleris said that, causing Loyar to glare at her.

"Whether I bathe or not…"

"Before you return, buy some insecticide and spray it on that child. You must've transferred the fleas and lice living on your body to her."

"Seriously? Why are you treating me like this? I don't have fleas or lice!"

"If you don't have them, that's even stranger. Were you so filthy that not even fleas or lice could survive on you?"

"Shut up!"

Surprisingly, Eleris has a tendency to tease Loyar. Loyar's feisty response was quite amusing.

It's somewhat similar to when I playfully poke at Harriet.

Anyway, Loyar, the white-haired beast who had transformed from a wet dog to a human, joined us.

"Alright, last time things were urgent, so I couldn't explain everything properly. I called you here today because we have some things to sort out."

Last time, I had them carry out their tasks without explaining the details and intentions. We couldn't talk much afterward since we had to return to the Temple.

Most importantly, there was Sarkegaar.

Eleris and Loyar might not know, but I had to make sure Sarkegaar understood the situation.

"Last time, it's true that I wanted to save Olivia. And it's true that I wanted to save Adriana as well."

The three of them remained silent at my words.

"Olivia shares Tiamata with me, and she plays an important role in imprinting divine magic on Tiamata. She's an irreplaceable existence. Of course, I won't say I'm using her just for that. Both Adriana and Olivia are important to me."

"Your Highness… You have too much affection for… No, never mind."

Sarkegaar seemed worried, trying to say something but ultimately closed his mouth. He seemed to have given up, realizing that he couldn't persuade me on this matter.

"Right now, what you're most curious about is why we let the humans know about our existence, right?"

"Yes, Your Highness. If humans know there is a new Demon King, they will unite and try to find us by any means."

The demon remnants reveal themselves to prevent the empire's fragmentation.

It would be good for the empire, but for Sarkegaar, who dreams of rebuilding the demon world, it would be the worst of all evils.

However, reasons can always be created.

"Sarkegaar, want to hear something interesting?"

"What is it?"

"Right before Riverrier Lanze died, he offered to join forces with me."

"!"

At my words, both Eleris and Sarkegaar looked appalled.

"He said that if his forces caused chaos in the empire, it would be good for us. That joining forces would be better."

"The Holy Knight Commander… said that?"

"Humans are such beings."

I lowered my voice.

"For their own benefit, they're more than willing to join hands with non-humans and kill their fellow humans."

Human Wickedness and Selfishness

I speak of it.

"So… All we had to do was join hands…?"

"I told you. Riverrier Lanze wanted two things I couldn't concede. So, there was no way to negotiate with Riverrier Lanze."

I don't intend to hide that Adriana and Olivia are precious to me.

"Right now, our power is still weak. If humans are divided now and the empire manages to mend the situation, by the time the real division should happen within the empire, everything might already be resolved."

"…"

"Now is not the right timing. It would be better to strike one by one when we have a solid foundation and everything is prepared. Be it a revolution or the establishment of a Holy Empire."

My words slowly change Sarkegaar's expression.

It's an expression moving from suspicion and doubt to finding an answer.

"The Holy Empire is not a matter that will disappear just because Riverrier Lanze

died. Independent factions are emerging within the Five Great Religions. They might find another focal point besides Riverrier Lanze."

"And those factions will join hands with us if needed."

"The revolutionary forces? They are no different. The empire is a huge monster. The monster the revolutionaries must face is big and powerful. They? Of course, if they think that the new demon world's power can shake the empire, they will surely join hands with us."

"Of course, if it were the days when the previous Demon King was thriving, they would never join hands with us. They just want to use us."

"In other words, we can only join hands now when we are both weak, to confront the monster called the empire."

"So, revealing ourselves now is not to unite humanity."

"It's to inform the anti-imperial forces of our existence."

"So, we approach them one by one and exchange each other's value for use. We can also discuss the timing and opportunity to tear the empire apart in detail."

"Whether it's a revolution, the establishment of the Holy Empire, or the reconstruction of the demon world, wouldn't it be better for each party to achieve their goals if they happen simultaneously, rather than sequentially? They wouldn't have a reason to refuse such a proposal."

"In other words, this is the starting point for creating an anti-imperial alliance."

The main objective is to inform humanity that the demon world is still thriving, thus stopping their division.

However, depending on how it's presented, we've revealed ourselves to join hands with the anti-imperial forces and to use them.

An anti-imperial alliance.

Everything depends on how it's articulated.

At my words, Eleris looks at me with a bewildered expression.

Even Eleris, who knows my true intentions, is astonished. She might think that all my talk about the future is a lie, and my real goal might be this.

Even Eleris, to whom I've revealed everything, is surprised.

"Your Highness's wisdom… I am in awe…!"

Sarkegaar had nothing more to say.

His doubts had been resolved.

They had to be.

Even if it all depended on how I explained it, if I really intended to do so, I could. If toppling the empire was the priority, the revolutionary forces would join hands with us.

Of course, after the empire fell, they would try to strike us down, but it was only natural to join forces with a future enemy out of necessity.

First, we would topple our most imminent and significant enemy, and afterward, we would bring down the smaller ones who had allied with us.

If we really wanted to, we could make it happen.

"Our contact with the revolutionary forces will be under the name of Darkland."

"I understand, Your Highness…"

Sarkegaar seemed to be in awe, as if he could not have imagined that my plan was so grand.

But in truth, it was all lies.

The affairs of the revolutionary forces and the Holy Empire.

During my contacts with the core forces and sharing information, what I would say was not about the revolution or the collapse of the empire, but rather that "the time

is not yet right."

I only needed to buy time until the Gate incident occurred.

About a year from now.

If I could keep them restrained during that time, my goal would be accomplished. Everything else could be postponed.

My head already felt like it was going to explode just dealing with the Gate incident, and I couldn't even think about how my actions now would lead to other events later if the situation hadn't been properly resolved.

I had roughly finished explaining my intentions. The most important thing was for Sarkegaar to be convinced, and he seemed to be.

Sarkegaar, brimming with enthusiasm, quickly left to find a way to contact the revolutionary forces as soon as possible.

Although he looks like that, he is thorough in his work, so I am not worried.

"Do you have anything to say?"

"If Your Highness says so, then it must be."

Loyar was still sitting there, dumbfounded, even after listening to the whole story. It seemed as if her mind had wandered off somewhere.

Anyway, the conversation was over.

"How's Adriana? Is she doing well? Judging by the fact that she bathed you, she seems to be doing even better than I expected."

Considering that Loyar was talking about being bathed by someone much younger than herself, she had many problems.

"She's like an angel compared to that obnoxious brat. She's quiet, kind, and always wants to help, which is honestly quite annoying."

Even though she said that, she couldn't help but smile whenever she mentioned

Adriana.

Defeated by a little sister in one shot.

Isn't that too easy?

Well… dogs are like that in the first place…

Looking at it, Ellen's personality was more like a cat's. She didn't express her emotions easily and seemed uninterested until suddenly coming over and sitting on one's lap.

Maybe Ellen and Loyar were never really compatible.

I had been thinking about sending Adriana somewhere else.

But seeing Loyar like this in just a few days, I started to wonder if Adriana was actually doing well.

Of course, that was only Loyar's opinion, and Adriana's thoughts might differ, so he decided to visit her later.

Somehow, Loyar's steps felt lighter as she left the sewer, and I looked at Eleris one last time.

"How is the situation with Lydia?"

"Um, she’s quite scared of me, to be honest. But I suppose there's no helping it. If you trust me with this… I believe there will be good results soon."

Lydia Schmitt was originally meant to be killed, but Eleris had asked to spare her life, so I trusted that she would handle the situation well.

Tuesday.

The chaos from before seemed to have somewhat subsided. Most of those who wanted to leave had left, and though the investigation continued, it seemed to be at a standstill.

There was no real trace to be found, nor was there any way to track anyone.

At the moment, I was in the student council president's office.

The president and vice president of the student council - people I had met before during the club budget issue.

Temple Student Council President, fifth-year student Rain Calli.

Vice President, fourth-year student Herman von Logarius.

The Temple Festival was over, and a sense of relief was in the air, but the two of them still looked quite exhausted.

"From now on, you will all be granted an audience with His Majesty, the Emperor."

The tournament winners were entitled to an audience with the Emperor. I had thought that the incident might have caused the audience with the emperor event to be canceled, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

There were a total of six winners, from first to sixth-year tournaments.

One Unrestricted tournament winner.

And there was an unusual occurrence.

This time, both Mister Temple and Miss Temple would have an audience with the Emperor as well.

Thus, not only was I present to hear about the process and precautions for the audience with the Emperor event, but Ellen was also there.

I didn't know who Mister Temple was. He was a handsome fellow from an ordinary class, quite unlucky in that regard. He was a fourth-year student, apparently.

I didn't care about him.

As she explained various precautions, Student Council President Rain Calli seemed to have something on her mind.

I knew what it was, even if she didn't say it.

Seven tournament winners.

Miss Temple and Mister Temple.

There should have been nine in total, but there were only eight people here.

The Unrestricted tournament winner, Lydia Schmitt, was missing.

Lydia Schmitt's disappearance.

That too, had become a significant issue.

The royal family might assume that Lydia Schmitt was an affiliate of the Nameless Monastery and had been killed in the previous incident.

However, a disappearance was still a disappearance.

Those who knew about the Nameless Monastery would know that the search for Lydia Schmitt was intertwined with the current situation.

If there were people who had seen Lydia Schmitt and me in the Aligar shopping district and remembered that encounter, the problem would become more complicated.

I had also taken a risk to save Adriana and Olivia.

If that became an issue, I could release Lydia Schmitt and force her to commit perjury.

Eleris's decision not to kill Lydia Schmitt might somehow benefit me in the end.

On the Way to Meet the Emperor

However, there was not a single person who should have been there.

Under the guidance of the Imperial Guard, we set off from the Temple.

Only the tournament winners were usually granted the honor of meeting the

Emperor.

The reason for the unusual summons of Miss Temple and Mister Temple this time was quite obvious.

“…I'm hungry."

Ellen, who stuck by my side and grumbled with a dull expression, had been elected as Miss Temple.

She is the younger sister of Ragan Artorius and a classmate of Bertus and Charlotte.

Those curious about what kind of person Ellen is may find her rather unremarkable.

Moreover, the Emperor knows that I have improved Charlotte's condition.

Saviolin Turner had once said that the Emperor would call for me someday.

It was quite unexpected that I would meet the Emperor under the pretext of being a tournament winner, even alongside Ellen.

The means of transportation on the way to meet the Emperor was somewhat different than usual, as the Imperial Guard accompanied us.

Instead of a magic train, we could travel directly to the entrance gate of the Imperial City through the warp gate located beyond the Temple exit.

Ellen seemed to be unimpressed by the whole situation.

She wore the same dull expression as always, as if the Emperor's summons held no particular excitement for her.

To be honest, I was a little nervous, but seeing Ellen's nonchalant demeanor was quite amusing.

…Wait.

But come to think of it, shouldn't I be the one most afraid of this situation?

With that thought, I wondered if I was actually more nonchalant than Ellen.

While entertaining these unnecessary thoughts, we entered the Imperial City.

Just like the last time, we boarded the prepared tram and began our journey toward the central palace.

Everyone was likely experiencing the tram inside the Imperial City for the first time, and they all seemed amazed.

"There's a tram."

Ellen seemed slightly intrigued as well.

"It's vast, so it's necessary."

On the other hand, I remained unimpressed. Without the tram, it would be quite inconvenient to travel within the Imperial City.

"Have you been here before?"

Ellen's question made me feel as if I was choking.

"No?"

There were the Imperial Guards and unfamiliar students here.

No one should know that I had been to the Spring Palace in the Imperial City on official business.

Bertus shouldn't know that I played a significant role in saving Charlotte's life.

Ellen simply nodded at my answer and gazed out the window.

The Winter Palace and the Spring Palace could be seen in the distance. I wondered if Charlotte and Bertus were there.

From the tram that stopped at the Central Palace Tetra, we all got off and walked in formation.

The main gate of the Central Palace was wide open. Everyone seemed to be overwhelmed by the solemn and majestic appearance of the central Imperial Palace

Tetra, which was not particularly extravagant. Upon seeing it again, it was a palace that felt majestic due to its simplicity.

As we passed through the central hall of the palace and entered the audience chamber, there were people who seemed to be either nobles or high-ranking officials lining the sides. At the very end of the audience chamber, in the center, someone was seated on the imperial throne, which was placed on a total of five steps.

A middle-aged man adorned with a golden crown and scepter, and draped in a red cloak.

There, Emperor Nelliod de Gardias of the Empire was present.

CHAPTER 331

The induction ceremony wasn't all that complicated.

The officials applauded us as a gesture of welcome, and we knelt before the emperor, listening to his speech.

I couldn't tell if it was prepared or impromptu, but in the end, it was all just superficial.

He said he was delighted to see the exceptional talents cultivated by the Temple, an institution preparing the future of the empire, and he hoped that we would continue to strive and lead the empire. To me, it was nothing more than empty words.

It was similar to the headmaster's moralizing lectures.

The emperor had us stand up and shook hands with each of us, encouraging us to keep up the good work. Naturally, I witnessed some interesting scenes.

“Strive on.”

“Ah, Your Majesty! This is the honor of a lifetime!”

“Hmm, hmm.”

Some of them were on the verge of tears.

No, that reaction was actually the majority, and it was to be expected.

“Strive on.”

“I shall engrave this honor and glory in my soul and serve the empire for the rest of my life!”

“Good.”

There was even a guy who seemed to have prepared his lines.

Anyway, everyone was squirming in his glory. Their reactions were rather ordinary.

"Strive on."

"Yes."

Ellen nodded her head once as if responding to a teacher while shaking hands with the emperor.

"Strive on."

"Thank you."

I had considered trying to express my gratitude as gloriously as possible, but since I didn't really think of it as an honor, I simply gave a brief reply.

Ellen and I had the most unusual reactions.

The emperor did not point out the absence of Lydia Schmitt at this event, perhaps he had been informed beforehand.

Afterward, a banquet with the emperor was scheduled.

Moving to the banquet hall, the Temple students and the emperor sat together at a long table and shared a meal.

Starting with appetizers, just like the meal I had at the palace last spring, dishes began to arrive one by one.

Om nom

"?"

Appetizers are always like this, but Ellen popped it in her mouth, chewed, then stared intently at the empty plate.

What the…

Why is there only this?

It had that kind of vibe.

Ellen had little patience when it came to food, and course meals required too much waiting. She preferred ordering various dishes, eating them all, and then ordering more.

She would quickly eat each dish as it arrived, then sit blankly until the next dish was served.

Come to think of it, she had been muttering about being hungry earlier.

Naturally, the emperor was observing the students' behavior as he ate.

The emperor whispered a few words to the lady serving his meal.

…After that, Ellen's portion was tripled.

It seemed he had discreetly instructed them after seeing her appetite. He didn't say it openly, perhaps to avoid embarrassing her.

Om nom nom

Now that her portion was more substantial, Ellen could finally pace herself and eat in sync with the others.

Of course, Ellen didn't question the sudden increase in food.

She just ate.

"Why?"

As I stared intently at her, Ellen tilted her head.

"I mean, sometimes… you're a bit… yeah."

"What?"

"Never mind."

She's someone to be proud of, really.

Her strong appetite earns her the Emperor's consideration.

I know I shouldn't be embarrassed, but I am!

Everyone else was tense and barely eating in front of the Emperor, while Ellen devoured her food and I openly scolded her. They all looked at us as if we were a strange spectacle.

No, I'm the stranger one here, right?

After the banquet, we briefly toured the central palace, Tetra.

Although we didn't visit the Emperor's bedroom, we saw the training hall, the guards' waiting room, and the gallery, making a full circle around the palace. I thought the audience and banquet would be the end, but the Emperor seemed to have allocated a significant amount of time for this official event.

Everyone was stiff with tension, ready to stutter if the Emperor so much as spoke to them. However, the Emperor didn't speak to Ellen or me.

We soon found out why.

When all the events were over and the students, accompanied by guards, were about to leave,

"You two, come here."

Saviolin Turner, dressed in the Shanafel uniform, called Ellen and me.

"Do you remember me?"

"Yes, the Shanafel squad leader."

Although they hadn't interacted much, Ellen had seen Saviolin Turner's face when she was appointed the first-year dormitory supervisor, so she remembered him.

"Good. His Majesty, the Emperor, has summoned you two separately. Follow me."

The other students left, and Ellen and I followed Saviolin Turner to an unknown destination.

-Knock knock

"Your Majesty, I have brought the two of them."

-Enter.

"Yes."

Saviolin Turner looked at Ellen and me.

"I trust you two to behave."

"Yes."

-Nod

She seemed concerned about me, knowing my true nature, but not so much about Ellen.

As if I would lose my mind in front of the Emperor.

When Saviolin Turner opened the door, the tall ceiling and walls filled with books caught my eye.

And in front of a wooden table near the window, the Emperor sat on a chair, backlit.

The Emperor's office, or perhaps a library.

It seemed like that kind of place.

On a nearby armchair, the cloak, scepter, and crown he had been wearing were placed. He probably wouldn't wear them when not attending official events since they were cumbersome.

Though made from fine materials, his clothing was not ostentatious.

Nelliod de Gardias, without the cloak, scepter, and crown, gave off the impression of

a scholar.

-Gulp

"Come closer. You don't need to kneel."

Following his command, Ellen and I took a few steps closer to the Emperor.

The Emperor looked at us.

"How much do you two know about each other?"

It was an unexpected question, but I knew what he was getting at.

Ellen was hiding the fact that she was the younger sister of Artorius.

I, too, was concealing that I was the master of Tiamata.

His Majesty must be asking if we know each other. If not, it must be to protect our secret.

"Though there's much we don't know, we know each other well enough," Ellen spoke before I could say anything.

Though there's much we don't know, we know each other well enough.

Her words seemed to dig deep into my heart.

"That makes things easier. Good."

The Emperor gazed at us in silence.

"As the Emperor of the Empire, it is an honor to meet the Champion of Tu’an and the Apostle of Mencius."

At his words, we couldn't help but be taken aback. The Emperor stood up and quietly looked out the window.

"The gods do not choose Champions meaninglessly."

Whether he was a believer in the Five Great Gods, we couldn't tell.

However, he couldn't deny the existence of the gods, so he must be speaking of the divine providence itself.

"Champions have always had their roles, and as long as there are situations in the world that require them, the artifacts and Champions will exist."

"…"

"…"

"Ellen Artorius."

"Yes."

"The Alsebringer is in the possession of the Empire."

The sword of the War God Alsebringer was a memento from Ellen's older brother.

"I figured as much."

As if it wasn't surprising, Ellen simply nodded.

"If the Alsebringer chooses a Champion, there will be owners of three out of the five divine artifacts in the world."

Three artifacts have appeared in the world. Two have already chosen their Champions, and the location of Alsebringer is certain.

"During the Great Demon War, only two artifacts were in the world: Alsebringer wielded by Ragan Artorius and Lament. Moreover, only Alsebringer was actually used."

The Emperor continued gazing out the window.

"Now that the Great Demon War has ended, an additional artifact has appeared. What do you think that implies?"

"Does it mean more dangerous events are on the horizon?"

“…Perhaps."

Ellen responded to the Emperor's words.

The gods don't let artifacts wander the world carelessly.

Even in the Great Demon War, humanity's greatest crisis, only two artifacts appeared. Now, there's one more.

The Emperor seemed to interpret this as a bad omen for humanity's fate.

But that's a misunderstanding.

The Five Great Gods are not solely gods for humans. It seemed clear that even the Emperor couldn't break free from such prejudice.

The Emperor turned to face Ellen and me.

"You must be aware of the recent rumors disturbing the Imperial capital."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Yes."

"About twenty elite Holy Knights, including the former Holy Knight Commander Riverrier Lanze, were killed by an unidentified group of demons. All of them were war heroes who had performed admirably during the Great Demon War."

Although this was already public knowledge, hearing the story from the Emperor's mouth felt novel.

Especially from the perspective of the mastermind behind the incident.

“Although this might simply be the work of remnants of the demon race, the royal family has taken the worst-case scenario into consideration."

"…”

"It could be that the Demon King is not dead, or there might be a successor."

Ellen seemed tense and swallowed hard at those words.

The Demon King.

To Ellen, that name was inextricably linked to her destiny.

Being the younger sister of the hero and born with an even greater talent than Ragan Artorius, Ellen had always been aware of the expectations placed upon her to become a hero.

"You all possess sacred relics and are highly valuable talents. But you are still young."

Although they had the qualities to become heroes, they were still mere sprouts, not yet ready.

"But when the time comes, are you prepared to face the Demon King in battle?"

The emperor's question was met with silence from both Ellen and me.

We couldn't say no.

However, Ellen had said that she didn't want to live a life where she had to save the world with her own life.

She had resolved not to make the same choice her brother had.

At the same time, she had risked her life to prevent innocent people from dying in Darkland.

Ellen had changed since the beginning of the semester.

"If the Demon King desires the annihilation of humanity, if their goal is to destroy everything I love……”

Ellen spoke calmly.

"Yes, I will fight the Demon King."

Unlike the original story, Ellen had created many precious things in her life.

She had risked her life for the world even when she had nothing, but now the meaning was different.

If the Demon King's goal was to destroy everything in humanity, she would kill the Demon King.

That was what Ellen said.

The emperor then looked at me.

"I feel the same way."

It wasn't about killing the Demon King.

I was prepared to fight for that purpose, and I was already fighting. The emperor, in the end, gave a firm nod to Ellen and me, who gave different reasons but the same answer.

"Thank you."

The words of gratitude from the emperor's lips were somehow surprising.

"From now on, the empire promises to provide you with the utmost protection and cooperation."

To the emperor, we were weapons to defeat the Demon King. Therefore, he promised not only the protection as Temple students but also unlimited cooperation from the empire until we became stronger.

Unaware that the subject of their cooperation was the very Demon King they were desperately seeking.

"And, Reinhardt."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The emperor's eyes revealed a slightly different emotion this time.

It was a more emotional gaze than before when discussing the future of the empire and humanity.

"Thank you for saving my daughter."

A feeling that could be called paternal love.

"…?"

Naturally, Ellen tilted her head, not understanding what he meant.

After exchanging those words with the emperor, Ellen and I left the imperial palace under the guidance of the imperial guards.

The emperor spoke to Ellen first, then to me.

"Before long, there might be something you'll need to do for Charlotte."

“…Is that so?"

"I'm not certain what it is yet, but can you do it?"

The answer was predetermined.

"Yes."

“…Thank you, Reinhardt."

There was a deep, unexpected resonance in the emperor's genuine gratitude.

Something to do for Charlotte.

What that was, I didn't know.

But if it was for Charlotte, it had to be done.

Of course, that was only an aside; the emperor's true request was something else.

In this situation, where the Demon King might have reincarnated, the emperor decided that my safety and that of Ellen Artorious, both of us possessing relics, should be of the utmost importance in the empire.

In return for pledging our lives to the fight against the Demon King later, we were to receive nearly unlimited support from the empire.

Ellen and I each took an item into our possession.

It was the same royal crest we had briefly received from Charlotte.

The emperor personally explained that with this, we were not merely Temple Royal class students, but possessed authority that surpassed even that of most high-ranking nobles.

We could receive treatment nearly equivalent to that of royalty anywhere, and in serious cases, even borrow military forces.

Put simply,

From now on, not only were our Warp Gate usage fees free, but we also had a free pass.

Of course, neither Ellen nor I felt this reality immediately.

"Explain what happened."

Left alone, Ellen asked me directly.

I had no choice but to explain the whole situation to her.

From the incident at the Spring Palace, Charlotte's rampage, to the struggle we had in the Spring Palace with Saviolin Turner.

Upon hearing the dates, Ellen seemed to recall the days I hadn't returned to the Temple and realized when it had happened.

"You said you'd never been to the imperial palace."

“…I'm sorry."

"You lied again."

Although I had said I'd never been to the imperial palace today, it was revealed that I

had, and even saved Charlotte while talking to the emperor.

"It's just that… it's something no one should hear…"

"…?"

"It's not that you shouldn't hear it… It's just that, well, there were others too."

Ellen reluctantly nodded her head.

"Right, it's not your problem, but Charlotte's. It must have been difficult to tell me because… it's the royal family's secret."

Ellen lifted her head as if convinced. It was a matter I couldn't arbitrarily discuss with anyone. Ellen seemed to be pondering something.

She hesitated to say something, then raised her head with a start.

"Can I be upset?"

"…What?"

"It seems like something I shouldn't be upset about, but I'm upset."

"Well, that's… your feelings…"

It's strange that she's seeking permission to be upset.

"Then, I'm upset."

As Ellen said this, her lips began to pout slightly.

"Ah… I'm sorry…"

"You always just say sorry."

Grumbling, Ellen kicked a stray rock rolling around.

"I want to hear something else."

Ellen didn't specify what that something else was. Just when I thought she was changing the subject, she turned her head.

She stared intently at the main entrance of the imperial palace, Emperatos, behind us. Then she carefully took out the royal crest she had received from the emperor.

"He said we're now treated almost like royalty, right?"

"We're not actual royalty, but… yes, he did say that."

"So, can we just go in there?"

Ellen tilted her head.

"Well…? It shouldn't be impossible, should it?"

The statement about being treated almost like royalty wasn't something the emperor would say carelessly.

The emperor considered us as weapons to fight the Demon King in the future. As champions who pledged their lives to the fight against the Demon King, he decided to provide us with the utmost protection and treatment until we become strong.

Ellen stared blankly at the entrance of the imperial palace.

I wasn't sure why she was curious about that.

"Let's go back."

Ellen began to stride away.

Not towards the Temple.

"Should we use the Gate?"

"Yeah, we're allowed to, right?"

Ellen was heading towards the Warp Gate.

It seemed I wasn't the only one thinking of this as some sort of Warp Gate high-pass

ticket.

If you think about it, the most frequent benefit we would use from being treated almost like royalty would be the priority access to the Warp Gate.

It may seem insignificant, but to me, it felt like an enormous privilege.

No.

Even Charlotte, who is actual royalty, travels using the magic train in the imperial capital.

Isn't it a bit of a nuisance for us to use the Warp Gate so casually?

Of course, even with that thought in mind, I followed Ellen, who was striding towards the Warp Gate.

If we can use it, then we should use it – that's just how it is.

Her reassuring back conveyed that attitude.

CHAPTER 332

"Since you all must kill the Demon King, we will buy as much time as we can for you to become stronger, while providing the maximum support the empire can offer," said the Emperor.

It was amusing, but there was nothing they could do about the situation. They couldn't exactly say, "Well, that's actually our plan."

The audience with the Emperor had finished, and the holiday had begun. Soon, the last day of the year was approaching.

On the day the year changed, a small party was held at the A-class dormitory, attended by like-minded individuals.

I prepared the food, and everyone, except for Bertus, had gathered. Today, even the notoriously clueless trio and Clifman joined in the fun at the cafeteria.

I cooked, and Ellen helped by my side.

"Ah, no… Reinhardt, you… you made all this?"

"What's impossible about it?"

As it was the first time the clueless trio had tasted my cooking, their eyes widened in surprise. Cliffman, who had occasionally snuck bites of my food, didn't seem particularly shocked.

It was a day filled with eating and having fun.

Of course, the true troublemaker, Liana de Grantz, who had surpassed our wildest expectations, went on an expedition to bring alcohol from the duke's mansion.

"Pour it up!"

"Drink up!"

Naturally, no one else even took a sip, but Liana and I drank heavily and became quite drunk before being subdued by Ellen and Harriet, respectively.

Thankfully, due to being subdued early, there were no unfortunate incidents with the supervising teachers discovering us.

The new year had dawned.

Since Sarkegaar was in contact with the revolutionary forces, and Eleris could ask for the Vampire Council's help at any time, we decided to stay in the imperial city.

I wanted to accompany Ellen to her hometown, but the circumstances wouldn't allow it.

It was a shame.

"You can go alone."

"Who doesn't know that?"

I walked beside Ellen, who was dragging a large trunk.

I didn't know when Ellen would return from her hometown, but she would be away for at least a few weeks.

The temple had long since been left behind, and all Ellen had to do was enter the huge gate in front of the temple.

Moreover, since she could use the royal crest to get a free pass, there was no need to wait.

It would be nice if she could pass through the gate quickly.

But somehow…

I felt a pang of sadness.

She would leave right after the holiday started.

Ellen's hometown was a rural village so remote that it didn't even appear on maps.

Ellen glanced at me while dragging her trunk, with the gate visible in the distance.

"I'll go."

"Uh-huh."

Ellen tilted her head, noticing my intense gaze.

"Should I… not go?"

"Uh?"

"If you tell me not to go, I won't."

This is insane.

Why would she throw me such a curveball?

"No, you should go. Your parents must be worried since they haven't seen you in a long time."

Ellen's parents would undoubtedly be concerned about their daughter's well-being. I have a lot to do, and I might be away from the imperial city for several days, so it wouldn't make sense for me to selfishly ask Ellen to stay.

It was because she had come this far with me. Ellen stared at the gate for a while, then at me.

Suddenly, she pointed to a café in the distance.

"Should I leave a little later?"

She said there was no rush, so she could kill some time and then go.

"Okay."

At my sharp response, Ellen grinned.

In the end, we spent nearly six hours at the café, sipping on beverages and idling away the time before she finally departed.

It wasn't as if we had shared any particularly exciting stories. We just sat there, staring blankly at the passersby and occasionally ordering a dessert to snack on.

"…"

"…"

This felt like a soldier on leave who was reluctant to return to duty and separate from his girlfriend. Of course, the roles were reversed. Ellen was the one leaving, and I was the one staying.

Unable to make a decision, Ellen tilted her head as the time grew more ambiguous.

"Should I just leave tomorrow?"

I swallowed down the words that almost came out in agreement.

“…No, I'm sure we'll do this again tomorrow, and you'll end up leaving the day after. Just go now."

"…"

Ellen pouted slightly.

"I don't mean it like that. I'm just saying it'll end up like that."

"I know what you mean."

We continued to waste time until Ellen finally stood in front of the gate.

"I'll be back."

"Alright, take care."

I didn't know what she had to be careful of, but I said it anyway.

"You too, be careful. With everything."

Ellen nodded and walked towards the massive warp gate.

Feeling a sense of regret, I watched her until she disappeared through the gate.

Before entering the gate, Ellen glanced back at me, gave a small wave, and disappeared into it.

I don't know how to put it.

Ellen and I…

We're awfully clingy…

Not that it's a bad thing…

"Is it safe to try this?"

"They haven't finished safety tests yet. What will you do if something goes wrong?"

"Would it kill me?"

"Yep, it might."

"Oh… really…"

I brought the bottle containing an unidentified blue potion to my lips, then set it down.

The Magic Research Club's mansion.

I was here to check the progress of Moonshine and the power cartridges.

It felt as if I were some sort of supervisor, but my actual role wasn't much different, considering I was the president of the Magic Research Society.

Christina, an alchemy major, said she had somewhat grasped the concept, so I tried to taste it, but she warned me that it might be lethal, so I put it down for now.

"So, when do you think it'll be complete?"

"Um, I can't be sure. Honestly, I think it's a miracle that we've come this far…"

Christina believed it was unbelievable that she had come this far. And she had a point. The Magic Research Society had been established less than six months ago.

It was true that, even in the original work, this was something that was created quite quickly. So, I'm confident that it will be completed before this vacation ends.

"It's amazing… I know it's funny to say this, but… it feels like fate. There's something like that."

A seemingly impossible item was ordered to be created. However, while working on it, Christina seemed to feel a sense of destiny as she figured out how it could be done.

"Then it's a good thing."

"Yep."

I can't go as far as to discuss the fact that I know the future.

Christina is not the problem.

The problem is somewhere else.

"Reinhardt…"

"…Uh, why?"

"Would you like to try this…?"

Anna de Gerna.

She was one of the main characters in the alchemy experiments with Christina, and she was the problem. Anna presented me with an unidentified pink fluorescent substance with a gloomy expression.

"Wha… What is this?"

"It's good for your body…"

"Oh, no. I… I'm healthy enough, so I don't need to be better… I… I'm sorry."

She's so scary!

Every time I come here, she subtly tries to feed me something, but her intentions never seem pure!

I can't mess with her like I do with Liana. Although she seems to have some goodwill towards me, I have no idea what kind of things she might do if this goodwill turns into malice.

"Anna! Stop trying to feed Reinhardt weird stuff!"

Thankfully, Christina stopped Anna, and Anna put the medicine bottle back into her arms with a sullen expression.

"Tsk…"

Really scary…

Every time I come here, I firmly resolve not to eat anything accidentally.

Next up was, of course, the power cartridge. The purpose of the Magic Research Society was mainly focused on Moonshine and power cartridges.

-Uuung

In the basement of the mansion, designed to withstand the greatest shock, Harriet was concentrating intensely with her eyes closed, holding an artifact made of blue crystal.

-Uuuung!

The blue artifact vibrated, emitting light and pulsating.

Adelia, myself, and the little senior, Rudina, were watching it, holding our breaths.

The vibration from the blue-lit artifact gradually intensified.

-Kukkak!

-Kyak!

In the end, the power cartridge exploded and shattered into pieces. Harriet wasn't injured due to the protection field she had deployed, but if it had exploded without protection, it would have been a terrifying explosion, enough to blow away an arm.

“…It exploded again."

Adelia sighed as if the ground was collapsing.

"Does it explode often?"

"Almost."

Isn't the process too dangerous? Although the explosion was defended by the protection, Harriet, with her hair sticking out, came out of the safe room.

"Why are you doing it so dangerously?"

“…If not like this, then how else should it be done?"

In response to my reproach, Harriet placed her hand on her waist and challenged me as if to say, "If there's another way, show it to me."

"Well, I can't argue with that… But still, it's because we're worried."

"I know you're worried, but there's no other way."

In the Magic Research Club, Harriet has the most outstanding ability to handle magic power. Therefore, only Harriet can attempt to use the unstable magic power within the cartridge like the magic power within her body.

If an unskilled person fails, it would be unclear whether the failure is due to their lack of magic power control or a defect in the cartridge itself.

That's why Harriet has always been in charge of the power cartridge experiments.

Recently, while they've managed to store magic power in the cartridge, there seems to be a problem with its utilization.

Every time a cartridge explodes, so does their budget.

"What could be the problem?"

"I felt the artifact's magic power resonate with my physical body, but it's still weak. When I try to cast magic, it seems like the circuitry can't withstand it."

"Is it a matter of durability?"

"It doesn't seem to be just that."

"Underclassmen! Let's review the circuit design!"

The three magic major students mumbled incomprehensibly. Nevertheless, it seemed they had made some progress and entered the intermediate stage.

Moonshine and power cartridges.

One way or another, it seems they should be completed by next year.

Honestly, even if they're not completed by next year, it doesn't matter much.

Both will be helpful even after the Gate Incident. If they are completed before the incident, they will greatly enhance their power.

Harriet has succeeded in drastically reducing magic casting time. So, all they need is magical power.

Once the power cartridge is completed, it will unleash tremendous power.

And the one who motivated Harriet to awaken her new way of using magic,

"I think we should use an open-type."

"Do you think so?"

"Try it, and if it doesn't work, then stop!"

Little Redina.

Harriet mimicked Redina's talent.

With Redina's no-casting talent, they should be able to fully demonstrate the true power of the power cartridge.

Things are going well, but bitterness eventually surfaces.

The thought that all their work here, huddled together, ultimately leads to war is inescapable.

These young ones will soon be thrown into a fight to kill or be killed, and some may die.

They didn't want to deny that this was necessary, but knowing that everyone would get hurt in the end, they couldn't feel entirely happy.

The trio, who had been mumbling for a while, seemed to have set a direction for the time being, as Adelia decided to design the power cartridge according to the new blueprint.

"Hey."

"What?"

"I'm going out of the temple for a while, do you have time?"

Harriet seemed to have some business to attend to.

"It's time to start researching dimensional magic."

Harriet's original role was to research dimensional magic.

With the tournament over and the break upon us, it seemed like it was finally time to focus on dimensional magic research.

"Why should I go?"

"Just come with me, you fool!"

Harriet seemed to insist that I follow her without question, and so I did.

Harriet and I left the Magic Research Society's mansion. Harriet carried a small backpack with her, though I had no idea what was inside.

"I wonder if Ellen made it back safely?"

"I'm sure she did."

Everyone knew that Ellen had returned to her hometown.

"I'm curious about what Ellen's hometown looks like. Aren't you?"

"It's just a countryside village, what's there to be curious about?"

"Well, it's also the hometown of Ragan Artorius…"

Ah.

Come to think of it, Ellen's hometown was also the birthplace of Ragan Artorius.

So, she's thinking about it as visiting the hero's birthplace.

But the general public didn't know which village Ragan Artorius was from. If they did, it wouldn't be a simple countryside village anymore.

Putting aside the discussion about whether Ragan Artorius' sacrifice was necessary or not, it seemed that Harriet personally admired and respected the hero. Who wouldn't?

"Should I ask if we can visit sometime?"

"…That's up to you, but remember that it's a countryside village."

"What's wrong with that? I think it would be a quiet and lovely place, like something out of a fairy tale."

"Do you think turning a faucet there would give you running water?"

“…Ah."

Don't assume that the living conditions would be the same as in the capital everywhere on the continent. Harriet seemed a bit taken aback by my comment.

"Consider yourself lucky if you don't pass out when using a traditional toilet."

"Traditional…? What's that?"

Harriet tilted her head as if she'd never heard the word before.

Well, there's no reason for you to have toilets on your mind.

"Never thought I'd be the one to explain toilets to you. Listen up, you blockhead."

"What, what? If it's something disgusting, don't say it!"

"In places without proper sewage systems, they dig a large hole in the ground and bury a huge container. They then build a toilet on top of it, and that's where they do their business…”

"Stop it, I said!"

"Of course, the waste doesn't go through sewage pipes; it just accumulates in the container. Every time you go in, you can see the traces of life piled up so thickly…”

"I said stop it! Ugh, I feel like I'm going to throw up!"

"That's not all; when the container is full, they scoop it out one bucket at a time. Then, they mix it with straw and let it ferment…”

-Slap!

"Stop it!"

In the end, I got slapped. Harriet had a vivid imagination.

It seemed that what she heard from me had stuck in her mind, and she couldn't help but picture it.

"But… that can't be… Wouldn't it smell?"

"Of course, it would."

"Then how… how do people… use it?"

"They just endure it."

"Uh, ugh… ugh…"

Harriet's face fell. She might have seen worse on the deserted island, but that would still leave her traumatized.

She'd faint the moment she enters a traditional restroom, definitely.

"Just because it's a place like something out of a fairy tale doesn't mean we live like we're in one."

"You're really horrible, you know!"

Harriet grumbled at me for unnecessarily shattering the illusion as she strode ahead.

"Didn't think I could go to such a place, huh?"

"No idea!"

"Aren't you pointlessly sorry to Ellen now?"

"Shut up!"

In the end, Harriet's face crumpled and she pleaded with me to be quiet.

Harriet and I arrived near the huge warp gate at the entrance of the temple. The atmosphere of the main street was still tense, but the commotion had subsided, so it wasn't as crowded as before, except for the queue at the warp gate.

"Dimensional magic…"

Harriet had used the excuse of 'wanting to go to another world,' but she seemed to have been conducting research on dimensional magic as I had asked, albeit sporadically.

Of course, she was busy with other things, so it was difficult to achieve any significant results.

"Remember when I told you that dimensional magic is used in various magic fields, even if only a little?"

"Right."

"Do you know the difference between dimensional magic and spatial magic?"

"How would I know?"

I only knew there was such a thing as magic, but I didn't understand its principles. Even if Harriet explained it, I doubted I could understand.

Harriet and I went to a quiet open space outside the temple.

It was a place where the temple's warp gate was visible in the distance.

"I still can't use teleportation, but you've seen me use blink, right?"

"Right."

"Watch this."

Harriet seemed to concentrate, and soon she appeared about three steps to the right of where she had been.

"This is blink."

"Yeah, I see."

It seemed she had chosen a place with few people, so they wouldn't be alarmed when she used magic.

"The concept is that my body moves. Teleportation isn't much different. It's the

concept of swapping the spatial coordinates where my body is with the target location… You don't understand this, do you?"

"No, not at all."

Seeing my eyes lose focus while listening to the explanation, Harriet sighed as if she was deflated.

"Anyway, teleportation and blink are magics that deal with space."

"Aren't space and dimension similar concepts?"

"Uh… They're similar but a bit different. In magic, dimension is a higher concept."

Harriet pointed to the distant warp gate.

"The warp gate system is not magic that deals with space, but magic that deals with dimensions."

"What's the difference, specifically?"

"Uh… How should I explain this? There are many types of magic related to portals and gates, but ultimately, they connect one space to another."

Harriet spread her right and left hands wide apart.

"Imagine that my left and right hands each represent a gate of the same system. Then, there is magic that connects these two separate spaces unidirectionally or bidirectionally as if they were attached. That's what a gate is."

"Well… I guess so."

It's not like I haven't used a warp gate before. A warp gate creates a dimensional door that functions as if two distant spaces are connected.

"Do you understand the difference between my body moving and creating a dimensional door that connects spaces?"

"So, connecting spaces is a higher-level magic, is that it?"

"I'm not sure if 'higher-level' is the right expression, but the basic premise is completely different. Spatial travel magic requires precise calculation of my spatial coordinates and the target coordinates, while gate magic is about creating a portal that connects two separated spaces."

Although traveling through distant spaces may be the same for warp gates and teleportation, the basic concepts are completely different.

"Of course, it's not entirely incorrect to call spatial travel magic a type of dimensional magic. However, gate magic is a field that more delicately interferes with dimensions."

The concept of dimensional magic itself was said to be scarce. That's because it is used to some extent in most magic systems.

"Actually, the method of going to another world that you're curious about isn't that difficult."

"Really?"

Is it easy? What's this about?

"If you have infinite magic power and accurate location, it's possible."

"So, you're saying it's not possible?"

"If we know the exact location of another world, we can open a dimensional door to it with infinite magic power. Of course, it won't work with a regular dimensional door."

"So, you're saying it's not possible?"

"Yeah."

Harriet gave a clear answer. The method itself is simple.

It's just that infinite magic power does not exist, and we can't know the location of another world, so even if we know, we can't do it.

However, infinite magic power is not an essential condition of the two.

As long as infinite magic power isn't required to connect the other world with a dimensional door. Anyway, warp gates are connected to other worlds, and that means the condition of infinite magic power does not have to be met.

Apart from my small epiphany, Harriet was looking at the warp gate in the distance.

"But while studying separately, I found out something about that warp gate."

"Oh?"

"It's a much more advanced magic than I thought, and there are a lot of secrets. There's hardly any public information, and the Magic Association and the Royal Family strictly manage it."

"Well, that's to be expected, right?"

"Of course, it is. Not just anyone can create a warp gate."

Warp gates must be crucial infrastructure for humanity, so maintenance would be thorough, and keeping the technology secret would be important. Harriet looked at the warp gate and tilted her head.

"So, I was kind of curious."

"About what?"

"Could someone create a private warp gate? If they could, would it be possible to connect it to that warp gate? If someone could interfere with the dimensional doors of the warp gate system itself… wouldn't that be a big problem?"

Harriet hadn't foreseen the gate incident.

However, it seemed that she had become somewhat aware of the inherent dangers of the warp gate itself.

CHAPTER 333

To use a modern analogy, it seemed as though Harriet was considering the possibility of someone hacking into the warp gate server.

It wouldn't be impossible. If one had knowledge of the warp gate's design, they could create a private warp gate that would function identically to the existing ones.

Furthermore, all warp gates are interconnected.

Let's assume that someone could create a warp gate connected to another world.

If so, with just one gate, anyone passing through it could be scattered across the continent, and the conclusion is drawn.

There's also the possibility that they might not even have to create one.

If a single warp gate were turned into a gate connected to another world…

All the warp gates on the continent could pour out monsters from that other world.

It felt like walking on thin ice.

The method of opening a dimensional door connected to another world.

The method of hacking the warp gate system.

Knowing just these two things, the continent would be prepared to face a gate crisis at any time.

"So in the end, I think I'll understand the dimensional magic a little better if I understand the warp gate system more, but as you know, it's classified, so I can't know it… It's a bit overwhelming to try on my own."

Harriet sighed deeply. There was information, but it was the empire's top secret, so it was inaccessible. Harriet's status was very high, but what she wanted was a special secret of the royal family and the magic world.

“…Well, I think I can help you with that."

"You can?"

I took out the royal crest from my pocket.

"What's this? Why do you have it…?"

"I received it a few days ago."

The royal crest.

It allowed me to receive the empire's cooperation to the fullest extent and be treated as royalty wherever I went. Harriet was surprised and bewildered that I carried the royal crest.

"Shouldn't this be enough to help?"

It might not work, but it's worth a try.

I couldn't ask for the warp gate system itself, but perhaps they could share knowledge about dimensional magic.

Harriet's face, which had been drained of color, momentarily lit up.

"R-really? Will it really work?"

"I don't know that yet."

"Come on, let's try something quickly!"

Harriet was a magician.

She was more excited than I was at the prospect of gaining new knowledge.

It was uncertain whether the royal family would provide information on the warp gate, which was the empire's top secret, but there was always an open window for me.

Bertus seemed to be staying in the Winter Palace for the break, as he had business to attend to, while Charlotte had returned to the Royal Class dormitory.

Since her health could deteriorate at any time, she wanted to be as close to me as possible, who could handle her condition.

Naturally, for the sake of dealing with any emergency, Saviolin Turner also returned to her position as the Royal Class dormitory supervisor.

And so, naturally, the person that Harriet and I went to see was not Bertus, but Charlotte.

"Dimensional magic research?"

"Yeah, Harriet wants to study it for purely academic reasons. The Empire has a lot of knowledge about it, right?"

Of course, I didn't mention any nonsense about the other world to Charlotte.

"Hmm, the materials in the temple aren't enough?"

Charlotte is not a mage. That's why she seemed to not understand why we needed the royal family's cooperation in this matter.

I explained various things on behalf of the hesitating Harriet.

There would undoubtedly be a lot of research materials on dimensional magic in the royal family and the Magic Association, who developed the warp gate system. However, we couldn't access that information because it was considered highly confidential.

"If it's confidential, then there must be a reason for it. I can't easily decide on such matters, but I think I can request some cooperation from the Royal Magic Department."

"Re-really?!"

Harriet was so happy that she almost jumped on the spot.

Even for the princess of the well-known magic Duchy of Saint Owan, accessing the

royal family's confidential research materials would have been a dream.

Charlotte quickly wrote a document in the lounge and handed it to Harriet.

"I'll put in a word for you. Take this to the Royal Magic Department tomorrow, not today."

"Th-thank you… Thank you, Your High… Ah, no, Charlotte!"

"Huh. It's not a big deal."

Charlotte looked at me and gave me a subtle smile, as if she was doing this favor because of me.

"Reinhardt, come to see me later."

"Sure."

Charlotte said that, as if she had something to tell me.

Harriet, who had obtained the permission too easily, looked flustered all the way back to the A-Class dormitory. Staring blankly at the permit, she carefully folded it and put it away, then looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"But, now that I think about it, why are you close with the princess… I mean, Charlotte?"

It seemed that Harriet had just started thinking about this issue. There was no reason for Charlotte and me, who were in different classes, to be close. Moreover, we even planned to have a separate conversation.

But isn't it too late to ask that now?

"Because I'm handsome."

"…What am I supposed to respond to that?"

Harriet's expression turned genuinely disgusted.

Wow.

She's really showing her true colors.

Harriet stared at me, urging me to stop joking and tell her the real reason.

"Hey, why did you and I become friends?"

"Huh?"

At my counter-question, Harriet furrowed her brow, seemingly contemplating the past.

Numerous memories passed by like a revolving lantern.

It all started when I stood up to a crazy classmate who was bullying the seniors and got an earful.

After that, her nickname became 'Madcap,' running around wildly and eventually bursting into tears.

The memories that followed.

"That's… true…"

Harriet's complexion began to pale.

"Me… friends with… someone like you… How on earth did that happen?"

She found it absurd to think that she, who had a towering pride, noble background, and outstanding talent, had become friends with someone who was a street urchin and ridiculed her for her thickheadedness.

"There are people in the world who enjoy being tormented, perhaps you're one of them."

"No! I hate it! I hate it, you fool!"

At my remark, Harriet's face turned bright red.

"Really, how did it happen? How did I… how did I end up…?"

"Well, as you said, 'how did it happen,' right?"

"What?"

To be honest, I never intended to become friends with Harriet. It was just one of those things that happened.

Teasing her made her look cute, and when she cried, I felt sorry for her and treated her well.

Everything doesn't always go as planned, and among those unplanned events, there are good ones as well.

"It's no different with Charlotte."

Just like how I became friends with you, my friendship with Charlotte also happened by chance.

When I concealed my identity as Valier and joined a different class, I had no way of becoming friends with Charlotte. It all started when she approached me to find Valier.

“…Is that so?"

Harriet murmured vacantly.

And a while later.

-Whack! Whack!

"Ah, I knew it, I'm so furious! You! Why did you do this to me! To me, why!"

"Ouch, you've been hitting me all the time lately!"

Harriet's face flushed red as she pounded on my shoulder.

It didn't hurt at all, but it was rather pitiful.

Harriet would continue her research on dimensional magic with the support of the Royal Magic Department. I'm not sure what she'll discover in the process, but since she's the type to learn ten things if she learns one in terms of magic, there's a possibility she'll find something useful.

Today's conversation alone had given us a few leads.

The Gate incident might be a dangerous lead, as it could be very easy to trigger if we know the method.

After some time, I headed to Class B's dormitory, since Charlotte had mentioned she wanted to talk.

"Are you here?"

"Yeah."

Charlotte was waiting for me in the dormitory's lounge.

No one else was in the lounge, and I wondered what they were up to. The original plot had taken a significant turn.

Saviolin Turner had become a permanent resident, and Ludwig had opened his eyes to the desire to become stronger.

Therefore, Ludwig would normally have to go on a trip during this winter break, but it seemed he had decided to spend this winter break training with Saviolin Turner.

All things considered, this was better than the original plot. Charlotte poured me some black tea, and although I still didn't know the taste of tea, I sipped it down.

Charlotte savored the black tea while looking at the winter sunlight outside the lounge window.

"They said you met His Majesty. With Ellen."

"Yes, I did."

"And you received the royal crest too?"

"Yes, that's right."

Charlotte placed her teacup down and gently laid her hand atop mine, which was holding my own teacup.

"…"

There was a particular emotion in Charlotte's eyes.

It was a hint of sadness. Charlotte must have known well what it meant for Ellen and me to receive the royal emblem.

We grant you unlimited privileges, but in return, risk your lives in the battle against the Demon King.

That was the implication, and it was something that Ellen, Charlotte, and I all understood.

"I've been thinking that he might be behind all this."

"Really?"

Charlotte already knew that Valier was no ordinary person.

Yet despite knowing this, she didn't doubt him and cut off all contact in order to avoid any further suspicion.

If Valier was indeed behind everything, Charlotte, who knew of Eleris's whereabouts, could have attempted to capture Eleris whenever she wanted. Of course, it wouldn't be easy.

Charlotte silently gazed out of the window.

She continued to hold my hand without moving.

"If he truly is the surviving heir of the Demon King, what should I do?"

"…"

Charlotte looked at me.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

"I really hate the thought of you having to risk your life fighting against him."

Charlotte's sorrow had its roots in a place I hadn't anticipated.

Both Valier and I were precious to her.

As the owner of Tiamata, I had been chosen along with Ellen to stand against the Demon King.

Charlotte, who didn't want Valier to get hurt, had still kept the whereabouts of Eleris a secret. She could have attacked her at any time if she suspected him of being the mastermind, but she hadn't.

But now, the situation had changed.

Since I had been chosen as the one to stand against the Demon King, there was a growing fear of the possibility that I might die in the process of fighting for my life against the Demon King.

Valier and me.

She thought she stood at a crossroads, having to choose between the two of us.

Her sad dilemma was reasonable, as she couldn't know that we were the same person.

She believed that she should find Valier for my sake. At least to determine whether or not he was truly involved.

But Charlotte hesitated, afraid that she might learn an irreversible truth.

Eleris had to leave the imperial capital or find refuge elsewhere.

At least, that much was certain.

I trusted Charlotte, but her faith in Valier was wavering.

Because of me, the same being.

"I'll tell the magician to run far away."

"Huh?"

"Then it will be fine."

Charlotte appeared stunned, as if she had heard something unexpected.

"I don't believe that the Demon King's heir, with the ruined Demon World behind him, could quickly amass enough power to threaten the empire."

"Even if he does manage to gather a few strong demons, what could they possibly achieve?"

"As the one chosen to fight the Demon King if they become a threat, I have the right to make this decision."

"And we still don't know for sure whether that child is truly involved in this matter, so don't feel too guilty."

It's all lies.

I have to tell such blatant lies right in front of Charlotte, without changing my expression.

I pretend to be sacrificing myself, even though I'm not.

Charlotte stares at me blankly.

My words tell her that I'll bear the risk in the future, so there's no need to chase the child right now.

In the end, hearing my words, Charlotte begins to cry in front of me.

"I'm sorry, Reinhardt…"

Charlotte seemed deeply sorry for being unable to make a decision easily, even though she knew what the best choice for me was in this impossible situation.

But what Charlotte felt sorry for…

My guilt was dozens of times greater, weighing heavily on my heart.

"Now… I'll… completely forget about… that child…"

Charlotte said this would be the last act of kindness and mercy for Valier. From now on, she would always stand by Reinhardt's side.

She told me, Valier and Reinhardt.

I hadn't thought about this problem.

Although Charlotte was aware of Valier's suspicious behavior, I didn't expect her to dig into it.

But I didn't anticipate the situation where her trust in Valier would waver due to her concern for me, especially after the Emperor granted the royal crest to me and Ellen.

Now that the demon forces have revealed themselves, Charlotte had no choice but to make sure of Valier's whereabouts for my sake.

That's why I went to see Eleris right away.

"We need… to move our hideout…"

"We should be careful when contacting through royal road now. From now on, let's communicate mainly through the Rotary Club. There will be delays in communication, but it's not the time to worry about that."

"Yes, Your Highness. I understand what you mean."

In Eleris' basement room,

Eleris understood perfectly well why she had to move her hideout due to the changed circumstances after I met the Emperor and Charlotte's emotional state.

Usually, that would have been the end of it, but these days, there was another person to worry about at Eleris' hideout.

"It would be sad to keep this child locked up here, so it would be nice to move to a place where she can live more freely."

-Twitch

"What are you scared of when I haven't said anything?"

It's Lydia Schmitt.

Lydia trembled at my gaze as if she were on pins and needles.

Somehow, she's the only temple student who knows that I am the successor to the Demon King. Eleris, being who she is, probably didn't abuse or mistreat her, but Lydia looked pale and dispirited.

"Tsk, at least we were able to save Olivia thanks to your pointless actions…"

I suppose this is what you call reaping what you sow.

If Lydia Schmitt hadn't acted up, I would have had to watch Olivia make a drastic choice or fall into the hands of Riverrier Lanze. Or I wouldn't even have known that Adriana had died.

Lydia sat on the floor, trembling as she watched my every move.

Her eyes seemed to beg for death.

Now, I have no feelings for Lydia Schmitt, but I can't just let her go.

There's a limit to being swayed by petty acknowledgement, especially since Lydia Schmitt knows too much that she shouldn't.

"So, what do you plan to do?"

"Um, first of all, I think I'll go to the Council. There… the child won't be able to escape, so she can live more freely. Besides, a meeting will be convened soon."

The Vampire Council.

A place known to humans as Epiaux fortress.

It seemed Eleris intended to take Lydia Schmitt there for a while. It wouldn't take long to settle the store.

"Has the date been set?"

"It should be soon. Once the exact schedule is determined, I'll pass it on to the Club, and if you're there at the appointed time, I'll come to escort you."

"Alright, got it."

Lydia probably didn't understand the conversation going on. I crouched down in front of the terrified Lydia Schmitt.

"Senior."

"Y-yes…"

Lydia Schmitt's eyes fell rapidly.

Her zealous faith crumbled easily at the mere mention of vampirism.

Even if she wanted to believe in me because I was an apostle of God, it became impossible once she knew I was the Demon King.

Lydia Schmitt had no other choice but to break down.

"Eleris isn't that bad…"

"…"

"At least better than me. You can live more comfortably."

-Pat, pat

I patted Lydia Schmitt's shoulder and stood up.

I only planned to leave her in Eleris' care.

If she breaks down, she breaks down; if she adapts and gets used to it, that's that.

"Let's go."

"Take care, Your Highness."

Eleris heads to the royal road.

I felt the situation was gradually, genuinely turning around.

In fact, rather than turning around in earnest, it felt like it was becoming irreversible.

Such thoughts kept pressing on my mind.

CHAPTER 334

Eleris moved quickly. Suspecting that Charlotte de Gradias' pursuit might begin, Eleris took action.

"It's going to be cold. You need to dress warmly."

Since they were already heading towards the polar region in winter, Eleris made sure to dress Lydia Schmitt in a thick coat and winter clothing.

Aside from that, Eleris only packed the most essential items.

There was no particular sentiment in leaving the Royal Road for Eleris. After all, it was a place she could return to at any time.

However, the knowledge that her return to the Vampire Council marked the beginning of a significant shift weighed heavily on her heart.

Something was about to begin.

A path that would either protect the world or lead to its destruction, she couldn't tell which.

Hoping that Valier's words were true, Eleris cast Mass Teleport.

-Whoosh

The location was known as the Epiaux fortress among humans, but its original purpose was to serve as a gathering place for the noble vampire families.

Eleris arrived at the snow-covered fortress with Lydia Schmitt.

“…Where is this?"

"Have you been here before? I heard the last time His Highness visited was during the Temple group mission."

"No, this is my first time… here."

"There probably won't be anyone else here… but just in case, don't stray too far from me."

Shivering, Lydia followed Eleris as she led the way. Eleris opened the side door to the cold, desolate fortress and entered.

-Uhh… sob… sob…

"Wh-who… who's there?!"

Lydia was alarmed by the sounds of sobbing echoing throughout the place.

"Low-level spirits," Eleris replied.

Though merely low-ranking apparitions, they were irritating. Lydia Schmitt's face turned pale as she watched the ghosts phase through the walls at will.

What kind of place is this?

Ideally, she would think only of eradicating such impure beings, but the deeply ingrained fear within her made her feel weak.

The sound of Eleris's calm footsteps echoed through the cold, gloomy corridor.

"From now on, I won't be monitoring you closely. You won't even know where you are, and there's no human habitation within hundreds of kilometers of this place. If you try to escape, I will come after you, but not to punish you—it's because I'm afraid you'll die."

At Eleris's words, Lydia Schmitt simply nodded blankly.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of your food, clothing, and shelter."

Only a mage capable of using teleportation magic could even reach this environment. If Eleris were to leave Lydia here and go away, she would inevitably wither away and die.

"But if you commit suicide because I'm not monitoring you, I'll turn you into a

vampire out of spite."

Eleris turned to look at Lydia as they spoke.

"Do you understand?"

“…Yes."

"When I deem you safe, and with His Majesty's permission, I will set you free. I can't say when that'll be, but it won't be forever."

At those words, a small glimmer of hope seemed to ignite in Lydia's heart.

The vampire before her was not the evil creature she had imagined.

Though her existence might be wicked, her disposition was not.

In the end, Lydia Schmitt surrenders to the tender and sad smile directed towards her by Eleris.

Therefore, Lydia Schmitt clings to hope.

Hope.

Unaware that it is always the precursor to greater despair.

-Step, step

Then, Eleris halts at the sound of footsteps echoing from afar.

"It seems we have a visitor."

Aside from the lower spirits, someone else is in the Epiaux.

Eleris stops in the castle corridor, looking into the darkness to see someone approaching. She glances at Lydia and puts her index finger to her lips.

"Don't say anything. Don't even look."

Heeding the seemingly cautious words, Lydia nods and lowers her head.

The figure soon emerges from the darkness of the corridor.

White hair, black eyes. An elderly man, clad in a black suit and carrying an antique wooden cane.

"It's been a while, Eleris."

“…It has, Antirianus."

Despite the old man appearing older at first glance, it was strange for Lydia to see him addressing the seemingly young woman Eleris with respect.

"I heard a meeting was to be held, so I came a bit early and have been staying here… And you've brought a curious one with you."

The man called Antirianus looks at Lydia, who stands trembling behind Eleris.

"And now, you plan to bring an even more bizarre one?"

"Don't use the term 'bizarre.' He is my liege."

At those words, a smile played at the corners of Antirianus's mouth.

"My liege… my liege, you say…”

"…”

Unable to suppress his laughter, Eleris's expression hardens.

"Does the young Demon King know who you are?"

"He doesn't. And he won't in the future, either."

"Oh, in that case, everyone in the Council must be cautious."

Lydia Schmitt couldn't understand the conversation.

"Everyone will begin to gather soon. Once they do, the meeting called by the Lord of Tuesday will commence."

Leaving behind an ambiguous smile, the old man called Antirianus slowly distanced himself from them. Eleris looks at Lydia.

"Lydia."

"…"

"You can speak now."

"Ah, yes…"

Afraid that speaking would cause trouble when told to be quiet, Lydia only opens her mouth after Eleris's words.

"I don't think anyone will harm you, but it's better not to converse with beings other than me."

Eleris spoke to Lydia, "Remember, you are the only human here."

Eleris sternly warned her.

Southwest of Kernstadt, the Second Empire, near the border in the frontier.

Few people knew of the existence of such a village.

A rural village, Rezaira.

The hometown of Ragan Artorious and Ellen.

After a long time, Ellen had returned to her hometown, Rezaira. The villagers welcomed her warmly, and Ellen, originally from the countryside, felt at ease with her hair tied back casually as before.

She caught up with her old friends and told them about the empire.

Everything that held no fascination for Ellen was a series of wonders for the children of Rezaira, such as the magic trains.

The village held a feast to celebrate Ellen's return during her break. Generous servings of meat and bread filled the banquet table.

After the surprisingly lavish feast for a rural village, Ellen went on a nighttime walk with her parents for the first time in a long while.

On the northern hillside of Rezaira at night, Ellen sat between her mother and father.

Ellen shared various stories.

The experiences she had at the temple, the tales of her many new friends.

Her parents were delighted that Ellen seemed to be living a pure and happy life.

However, as she shared these seemingly insignificant stories, Ellen's heart grew heavier.

Although the conversation began with light-hearted stories, inevitably, only the heavy stories remained.

There were things she didn't want to discuss, but she had to.

Ellen had come home for a break.

Although she had returned to rest, Ellen had something to tell her parents.

Something she needed to say.

The full moon shone brightly in the winter night sky.

After sitting quietly for a while, Ellen softly spoke.

"It seems the Demon King is not dead or a new one has appeared."

"…"

"…"

At her words, both of Ellen's parents' expressions hardened. Just as Ellen had lost her brother to the Demon King, they too had lost their son.

The name of the Demon King was not one to be taken lightly.

"I met with His Majesty the Emperor a while ago."

Ellen's parents listened quietly to her story.

"He asked if I could fight the Demon King… I heard such words."

Ellen's mother gently took her hand. Her father wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

"I still can't understand my brother."

"But, if the Demon King is the one who wants the things I love to disappear, if the Demon King is such an entity."

"I said I would fight the Demon King."

Ellen looked at her parents.

"I'm sorry."

They had lost their son in the fight against the Demon King and now, they might have to lose their daughter in the next battle. Ellen didn't want to bring such sorrow to her parents.

But Ellen knew it too.

If only Ragan Artorius could have stood up against the Demon King, then she would be the only one who could stand up against the next Demon King.

But she wasn't alone.

She had people who would fight with her. That's why Ellen could make that resolution.

If the world was going to force her to defeat the Demon King, she would have no choice but to accept her fate. She apologized to her parents, who were standing in front of their daughter.

Their daughter who had decided to risk her life in a battle at such a young age.

Ellen's mother and father exchanged glances.

"Ellen, can we talk to you separately for a moment?"

"Yeah."

"Just wait a moment."

As if they had something to discuss with each other, Ellen's mother and father left her sitting there and went off somewhere.

Ellen gazed up at the sky in silence.

She didn't know what her mother and father had talked about when her brother was outside dealing with various matters.

There were times when he would come back in the middle of the night, gently stroke her sleeping head by her bedside, and leave again.

Her brother always shared important matters with their parents, and she was never a part of those conversations.

Ellen didn't know what her parents thought about her brother's decisions and actions.

All she remembered was being slapped by her usually gentle father when she had badmouthed her brother's final moments.

It was a rainy day.

Her mother and father must have been more heartbroken.

Ellen still hated herself for that time.

Now, time had passed, and her parents were faced with a daughter who had made the same choice as their son.

Ellen couldn't imagine how they must have felt.

Would her parents oppose it?

Having already lost a son like that, they wouldn't want their daughter to be involved in such a dangerous situation, would they?

What should she do then?

If she didn't fight, Reinhardt would have to fight alone. Of course, Reinhardt wouldn't be alone, but in a situation where they needed someone with a sacred artifact, if she backed out…

If the world wanted a second hero and Ellen wasn't there…

Reinhardt would be forced to become that second hero.

Avoiding a battle against a powerful, unknown entity would put Reinhardt in even greater danger.

That's why Ellen couldn't choose to avoid the fight.

After a while, her parents returned.

Her mother took Ellen's hand.

"My daughter."

Ellen met her mother's sorrowful eyes.

"Can't you change your mind?"

"……”

Of course, they had no choice but to oppose such a decision. They had already lost a son in a similar situation, and the thought of their daughter doing the same would be devastating.

Ellen lowered her gaze.

“……I'm sorry, Mom. Dad."

She couldn't not fight.

Especially since she wasn't alone.

If she didn't step forward, Reinhardt would have to stand alone in front of the Demon King.

That's why Ellen felt even more guilty in front of her grieving parents' plea. Neither her mother nor father spoke for a while.

Ellen did not try to persuade or plead for long.

When her daughter spoke to that extent, it was as if they knew they couldn't change her stubbornness.

Parents can't help but know their child well.

"Then let's go somewhere with your mother and father for a moment."

"Where?"

"You'll know when we get there."

Her mother took Ellen's hand, helped her up, and led the way.

Being familiar with hiking, both Ellen's mother and father found their way easily, even in the middle of the night.

The place where Ellen's family arrived was a valley near the village of Rezaira.

It was a place familiar to Ellen as well, for whenever she played in the water as a child, it was always here.

Her mother slowly approached the rather massive frozen waterfall in the valley and gently touched the icy wall.

"…?"

Ellen couldn't help but be flabbergasted by the scene unfolding before her eyes.

As if the space itself had become distorted, suddenly, the center of the frozen waterfall split wide open.

It wasn't that the ice had shattered; it seemed as if the space itself had been intruded upon and a gap had been created.

"W-what… What is this?"

Ellen, seeing this spectacle for the first time in her life, couldn't find the words to say. However, her mother and father calmly held Ellen's hand and stepped into the interior of the waterfall.

It was Ellen who had lived here all her life.

But it was the first time she had seen this space behind the occasional waterfall in the valley.

She had seen the waterfall blocked off several times.

But there was a cave behind it.

"Ellen, follow us for now."

Her mother led the way, and as her father manipulated something nearby, a dim light began to swirl around the cave.

In the pale blue light, Ellen, unable to understand the situation, slowly walked into the cave, following her parents' lead.

"Your brother didn't intend to go on an adventure from the beginning."

"What… do you mean?"

"He originally left the village to find 'a certain item'. Because Ragan was so talented, the village council decided on it."

Ellen was completely unaware of this.

She thought Ragan Artorius was just a free spirit who enjoyed adventures, but that wasn't the case at all.

What kind of place was Rezaira?

Ellen realized she didn't know anything about the place where she had spent her entire life.

"So, he met many people, experienced many things, and made many friends. Eventually, he came to think of the world's matters as more important than those of the village… That's what happened."

"What is… what is it? Our village… what is it?"

"Later."

Her mother held Ellen's hand.

"I'll tell you later, my daughter."

It was her mother's words.

"One of the things Ragan set out to find was the very Lament you possess, Ellen."

It was her father's words.

Soon, the cave began to take on a structure similar to a building.

In the corridor with well-polished walls, numerous passages and hallways appeared before Ellen's eyes, following the pale light.

Ellen couldn't see what was in that place. As if there was a predetermined destination, her parents led her through the cave inside the waterfall toward a specific location.

-Pop!

As the light illuminated the cavity, Ellen could see something in the middle of the empty space.

There, a cloak emitting a blazing light like flames flickered as if it were fire itself.

"This… this is…"

Ellen's eyes widened as if they were about to tear apart upon seeing it.

"This is one of the two items Ragan set out to find, along with your Lament."

The Cloak of the Sun God.

The Holy Relic of Shal'am.

Lapelt.

It was right in front of Ellen's eyes.

Her mother, holding the Cloak of the Sun God, slowly approached and carefully draped it over Ellen's shoulders.

"May the blessings of the moon and sun be with you."

With those words, her mother gently kissed Ellen's forehead.

CHAPTER 335

A week into the vacation.

Harriet had been visiting the Royal Magic Department almost daily to study dimensional magic. She didn't attend the magic research meetings too often, as her presence would likely only be a hindrance.

Eleris had left the Royal Road.

According to what was confirmed at the Rotary Club, a conference was scheduled to be held at the Vampire Council in a week. Eleris would return in time for it, so attending the Rotary Club around that date would secure a chance to participate in the Vampire Council.

The five vampire families.

Securing their cooperation would be as good as gaining a million-strong army.

Whether it would be possible to obtain their power through threat or persuasion remained uncertain.

There was no way of knowing how to persuade or intimidate the ones who had refused to cooperate during the Demon War.

The Black Order would make contact again, and preparations had to be made to obtain information about Cantus Magna for negotiations with them.

If the Vampire Council couldn't provide such information, there was no telling if resorting to insane tactics like luring Cantus Magna using the Golden Week would be necessary.

Moreover, some grasp of the gate incident had been attained through information about the warp gate itself.

The brooch Charlotte gave was already a clue.

Activating the brooch-shaped artifact and passing through the Royal Road's warp gate would lead to the Spring Palace's underground warp gate.

The exact process remained unknown.

What was important was that magic technology capable of interfering with the warp gate system already existed.

Of course, this was an authorized artifact.

The key point was obtaining information about the existence of magic technology that could interfere with the warp gate, regardless of how the route was set.

The existence of the artifact Charlotte provided had already suggested one possibility.

So.

In other words, I had officially begun to immerse myself in the problem of saving the world.

My head felt like it would burst, there was no time to spare for thought, my life hung in the balance depending on the outcome, and there was always the possibility that my true identity would be revealed.

Of course, in the midst of all this, there were countless trivial matters to attend to.

Clang! Clatter!

"Phew."

"Not bad at all."

After exchanging a round of swordplay with Olivia, I hung the practice sword on its rack, feeling a tingling sensation in my palm.

Without Ellen, there was no one to practice swordsmanship with. That's why I was practicing swordsmanship with Olivia in the training hall.

I could have practiced with Cliffman, but in the end, he hadn't yet awakened his

Magic Body Strengthening, so he wasn't a suitable opponent for me to give my all.

Of course, I could have gone to Saviolin Turner, who would gladly teach me swordsmanship, but I decided it was better for her to focus on teaching Ludwig.

So, I was practicing swordsmanship with Olivia.

Olivia, who had been swinging the practice sword, casually slung it over her shoulder.

I had come to truly appreciate Olivia's skills after the recent tournament. Until then, she had never mentioned teaching me swordsmanship.

Of course, since I asked, she agreed to come to the training ground.

Olivia's skill is undoubtedly incredible.

Neither the output and stability of her Magic Body Strengthening nor her swordsmanship itself can be compared to mine.

Even with my best efforts in intuition, self-suggestion, and Magic Body Strengthening, I couldn't keep up with her at all.

I couldn't help but feel the reality that the reason I was able to kill Riverrier Lanze was due to a combination of achievement points, word magic, and situational luck.

"Shall we try again?"

"Let's do it."

Holding her sword, Olivia gazes at me with a calm expression.

I also take out my practice sword and start enhancing it with magic.

-Clang! Thud!

In an instant, Olivia rushes towards me and roughly pushes my practice sword aside.

"Weak spot!"

-Whoosh!

"!"

As she pushes my sword away, my chest is exposed. Olivia embraces my neck and kisses my cheek.

"Ah, really. Can you please stop doing this?"

"Then try being stronger than me?"

Everything would be fine if it wasn't for her occasional bizarre behavior.

After struggling for quite some time, I finally collapsed onto the training ground floor, utterly exhausted.

It's true that my stamina has improved significantly compared to before, but dueling while using Magic Body Strengthening brings a stronger sense of fatigue.

A sense of exhaustion different from simply losing strength.

Thankfully, I hardly felt any damage to my magic circuit from using Magic Body Strengthening alone. My pure magic power has increased, and I already have two talents in magic control and response.

It would be strange if I didn't adapt quickly.

"You're quite weak, Reinhardt."

“…It's you who's abnormal, senior."

"Isn't it a good thing to be especially strange among the oddballs gathered in the Royal Class?"

"You're right about that."

While lying flat on the floor of the training ground, Olivia, who sat beside me, playfully poked my cheek.

"She went back to her hometown, huh?"

"Yes."

"Tsk, you should know that you're too kind to me."

I had no words to refute her claim that she came to me because Ellen wasn't around.

"You must feel sorry, seeing that you can't say anything."

Olivia said so, but she didn't seem furious or intent on arguing.

I owe Olivia a lot.

Even so.

Neither of them knows that I took tremendous risks to save Olivia and Adriana. I don't want them to know.

But I can't seem to be a proper gentleman. I want to forget about it in a cool way, but I can't.

I can't stand the fact that I can't make a joke about it! I don't plan to say anything, but I just can't stand this situation!

I took a risk far beyond being caught in a cross-dressing contest for her sake. If she feels hurt by me, that's just how it is!

"Reinhardt."

“…Yes."

"Did you do it?"

“…Pardon?"

What is she talking about?

Did she figure something out?

What could be the clue? Olivia has no evidence or leads to find out that I am the Demon King.

Seeing my expression, as if my mind had come to a halt, Olivia gives a sad smile.

"The orphanage I sponsored… The director and the teachers… They were all taken away."

“…Ah."

It's like a thief complaining about their foot going numb.

Although we were talking about something completely different, the conversation took an unexpected turn.

Yes, that was my doing.

I couldn't tell the Emperor, but when I told Charlotte that everything was resolved regarding Eleris's escape, I also asked her to help with the orphanage-related issues.

I was already aware of the orphanages that Olivia personally sponsored. It seemed strange that they were struggling financially despite receiving support.

It was just a few days ago, but it seemed Charlotte had taken immediate action. It looked like Olivia had realized that as well.

Olivia gazes at me with a sad expression.

"You… did this?"

"Yes."

"…”

I wished Olivia wouldn't know, but in the end, it was an issue she couldn't help but find out about.

"In the Empire, there are already support programs for war orphans. So, it just didn't make sense that there were orphanages with financial issues."

Olivia didn't seem happy. There was no way she could be happy.

The children would be able to live a more prosperous life under stricter management, but Olivia felt betrayed by the people she trusted.

Olivia sank down to the floor of the practice hall.

"I didn't think they would do that. I never doubted them for a second. I thought there was no way anyone would… intercept the money meant for the children."

Her trust in humanity.

Her trust in the goodness of people.

Olivia had such human affection. After being disappointed in religion and faith, was she now disappointed in humanity?

Olivia remained silent for a while before speaking.

"The funeral begins today."

"The funeral…?"

"Yes, my stepfather."

Riverrier Lanze.

His death is a significant event not only for the religious community but for the entire Empire.

No matter how much he had fallen from grace, he was a war hero. He even perished fighting against the demon race.

So, regardless of the actual circumstances and the various problems entwined in his death, on the surface, it is a tragic event for the public. That's why a funeral is being held to mourn Riverrier Lanze's death, now that the chaos has been quelled.

"Reinhardt, can you come with me somewhere for a bit?"

I couldn't bring myself to refuse Olivia's request.

It wasn't noticeable within the temple, but it was apparent that Riverrier Lanze's funeral was being held on a national scale. Black flags were hung on the houses along the streets as a sign of mourning, and people were selling flowers for tribute.

The funeral procession was said to head from the abandoned monastery, where the body was recovered, to the headquarters of the Holy Knights Order.

From the southernmost part of the Imperial Capital, the path towards the Holy Knights Order was controlled by the guards as the funeral procession entered the city.

What to do about this…

Those damned demons…

A significant number of the people who had gathered to watch the funeral procession were believers of the Five Great Religions, and even those who weren't were civilians mourning the death of a war hero.

Hatred towards demons and fear of the Demon King pervaded among the people.

It didn't matter why Riverrier Lanze had been there on that day, at that place.

People believed that Riverrier Lanze had fallen in a fierce battle against the remnants of the demons, and in the end, that was the truth.

They simply didn't know the whole story.

No one knew the true face of Riverrier Lanze, who had tried to regain power by threatening his foster daughter, and ultimately sought to join hands with the Demon King as his life hung in the balance in an attempt to divide the empire.

Olivia must have been bewildered by this situation.

Thanks to the demons' attack, she was safe in this situation.

It would be hard for her to accept that Riverrier Lanze, who had threatened her with Adriana's life, had become a hero in death.

From the southern crossroads, the grand funeral procession appeared.

It was escorted by knights and priests.

Following the carriage they led were dozens of splendidly decorated coffins, holding Riverrier Lanze, knights, and nameless believers of the monastic order.

Riverrier Lanze's neck had been severed. I didn't know how they had managed to recover the bodies that had been torn apart, crushed, and burned by Loyar's magic.

I wasn't sure about the opinions of the entire Holy Knights Order, but I could see Eleion Bolton leading the procession on a white horse at the front.

Both the empire and Eleion Bolton must have been pleased with this situation.

Nevertheless, they feigned sorrow for the ignorant citizens and solemnly led the funeral procession.

As the funeral procession appeared, people burst into tears as if something incredibly sad had occurred.

"Oh dear!"

Tears began to spread like an infection, starting with a few cries, which felt quite strange.

These people didn't know Riverrier Lanze.

I didn't understand why they were so sad about his death, or even shedding tears. I couldn't tell if it was because of their faith or something else.

However, I had no right to doubt their tears.

I was the most inhuman person here, after all.

Whether or not those I had killed deserved to die, I was a madman who had come to watch the funeral of the people I had killed.

There were quite a few people who didn't cry among the mourning visitors who had quickly become a sea of tears.

However, those who didn't cry seemed to be filled with an awkward air.

They were restless, as if not crying had made them sinners.

Tears were like a hidden spring.

Unless one had special training, it was impossible to cry just by wanting to. Tears welled up on their own, not something that could be summoned at will.

As the funeral procession gradually approached, Olivia calmly watched.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes."

"Is it that I find all of this so repulsive? Am I just too wicked?"

Olivia whispered as she watched the approaching coffin that contained her stepfather's corpse.

All of this was nothing more than a show.

People didn't know what they needed to know. They only did this because turning Riverrier Lanze into a hero in death made for a pretty picture.

Olivia probably didn't like Riverrier Lanze, but she must have disliked the situation in which his death was being exploited just as much.

She felt disgust in all of this.

"I think it's possible," I said.

Olivia shook her head at my words.

As the funeral procession gradually approached, entering through the main streets of the southern imperial region, the surrounding area became even louder with people's cries.

Following the guidance of Eleion Bolton, they would head towards the Holy Knights headquarters. People had gathered to see the long procession, throwing flowers and

shedding tears.

We were watching the spectacle.

“Look, over there…”

“Is that the Saint?”

“If she's the Saint…?”

“She's the Commander's daughter!”

We had been watching for too long.

Olivia was a recognizable figure.

That's why there were plenty of people who could recognize her.

When someone in the sea of tears gestured to Olivia, people's gazes instantly turned to her.

Eredian's Saint.

Although she was the protagonist in Riverrier Lanze's fall from grace, people had no interest in that now.

The previous Holy Knights Commander and a war hero who had died honorably fighting demons.

His daughter's presence at this event was what mattered.

“Oh, Saint!”

"…”

Olivia's expression hardened, and the crowd around us quickly swarmed towards her and me.

"Oh, Saint! What should we do about this! What can we do!"

"You must avenge us against those filthy and despicable demons!"

"Following your father's footsteps, you must also take the lead in vanquishing the demons, Saint!"

"Oh, Saint! We are too afraid to live!"

"Saint!"

"Saint, you must save us!"

"How can we deal with this situation without the hero!"

In an instant, the surrounding area became chaotic.

As if Olivia were some kind of god, countless people fell to their knees in front of her, wailing.

They couldn't see the reason Riverrier Lanze had fallen from grace or that Olivia had renounced her faith.

The Demon King had returned.

But there was no hero now.

Someone had to confront the Demon King.

Someone other than me – someone great, brave, virtuous, and powerful.

Someone to defeat the Demon King in my stead.

People wished for it.

You must defeat the Demon King, Saint!

There's no one else but you, Saint!

Oh! Saint! Please save us!

They didn't know Olivia's true strength.

They only vaguely knew that she possessed a powerful divine force and that she was a person of such great virtue as to be called a Saint.

Countless people treated her as if she were some sort of queen.

Begging on their knees, asking her to die on their behalf.

Witnessing numerous people boldly pleading for her to sacrifice herself for them.

I saw the focus vanish from Olivia's eyes.

Olivia was tormented by an overwhelming pressure.

She suffered among the multitude of people urging her to regain her faith.

She saw the detestable behavior of those who would selfishly control others' lives for their own benefit and the spectacle of such people's deaths being praised.

The funds that had been squeezed out and prepared so far were being intercepted by the teachers.

Beyond the problems of faith and religion,

Now, in places completely unrelated to faith and religion, she saw people boldly demanding that she die in their stead as they wailed.

Witnessing people who used their tears as a shield and tried to push someone to death with indifference from behind that shield.

It seemed as if something important within Olivia had snapped.

"Why me?"

A cold, emotionless voice flowed from Olivia.

"Why do I have to do this?"

Olivia was broken.

CHAPTER 336

Why must I die for you?

Olivia pushed past the stunned onlookers, leaving the scene as they stood frozen in response to her words.

"Disgusting."

With a hardened expression, Olivia said this.

"Human beings are just so disgusting."

The last shred of Olivia's love for humanity seemed to break as she muttered those words, covering her mouth.

Having encountered the ugliness of human nature numerous times, it seemed that Olivia had finally lost any remaining sympathy for her own kind.

"Don't be so harsh. Those people just don't know any better."

"…”

Olivia clicked her tongue.

"Right, I suppose if they knew, it would be different."

Olivia looked at me.

"They would have probably claimed that since the demons saved me, I must be filthy and impure, and should be tied to the stake and burned."

Olivia's eyes changed.

The eyes that always appeared somewhat sorrowful now seemed to reveal a dark abyss, reminiscent of Lydia Schmitt's gaze.

The evil and repulsiveness of humans had ultimately broken Olivia.

I couldn't find the words to argue against her.

I couldn't refute Olivia's claim that humans, ignorant or knowledgeable, were disgusting in their actions.

"The Demon King? Yes, I don't know why the demons saved me. But if the Demon King's true goal is to recreate the demon realm and kill all humans…"

Olivia gripped my hand tightly.

"I'll fight to protect the few people I love. I'll never fight for creatures like them."

Olivia embraced me.

Just as Ellen had done.

Olivia had also made up her mind to fight.

However, her underlying reasons had drastically shifted compared to the Olivia we knew.

It couldn't have been any other way.

Olivia was the epitome of a strong-willed person with a gentle exterior. She was kind and friendly to many, yet steadfast in her convictions.

But even such a person could break when pushed to their limit.

She was growing weary of gently rejecting and pushing away the countless people who clung to her.

Recent events had driven Olivia to the edge of emotional collapse.

Discovering that the orphanage she had been sponsoring was embezzling funds and starving the children, Olivia felt a sense of betrayal.

And in the end, she faced people who weaponized their tears and demanded that she become a sacrificial victim.

Realizing she had no reason to live for such despicable beings, Olivia transformed.

If she had to fight the Demon King, she would, but not for the sake of humanity, as Olivia declared.

It seemed that if she understood this feeling, she might join forces with the next Demon King to bring about humanity's destruction.

However, I didn't want to exploit Olivia's broken state. I didn't want to burden such a pitiable person, who had suffered enough, with some bizarre sense of duty.

In the end, I didn't wish for the destruction of mankind either.

Of course, Olivia hadn't changed much compared to her usual self.

“Get lost. Don't be annoying.”

“Wh-what? Um, senior, what are you…?”

“Didn't I tell you to get lost? How many times do I have to tell you I'm not going? Are you an idiot?”

“What… what… what are you… um, senior…?”

“If you're not an idiot, why do you keep making me repeat myself? Hey, look me in the eye. Look me straight in the eye.”

“Um, senior, you're scaring me. Why are you suddenly…?”

After that, I saw Olivia harshly snapping at people a few times.

It wasn't just Lady Lydia Schmitt who demanded her return to the religious world.

Perhaps until now, Olivia had shown reluctance and refusal to those demands, but she seemed to have moved beyond that and began to respond more fiercely.

In a way, I thought that was a relief.

“Ah, Reinhardt! Want to have lunch together?”

But when she scolded her junior like that, and then immediately smiled brightly when she saw me.

Rushing over, grinning, and linking arms with me…

Somehow…

It felt like she had become even crazier than before…

I was… a little scared.

Olivia had changed.

But the superficial changes seemed to be positive.

People kept clinging to her because she appeared overly kind, and they couldn't let go of her, even when they didn't feel forced.

To put it nicely, she seemed like an easygoing person.

When Olivia began to act more hostile, people seemed to be too scared to speak to her casually.

Olivia would not lose to anyone in terms of strength. If anyone tried to use force against her, they would only end up being beaten.

So, I thought it would be good for Olivia to be strong for her own sake.

During such a vacation, one day.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

In the southern forest where the Rotary Club headquarters was located, I met Eleris.

"I will now explain the Council to you. You must remember it well."

My meeting with the Vampire Council.

For this, Eleris began to inform me of the precautions I needed to take, from one to ten.

The future would change significantly depending on today's meeting results.

So, there was no room for mistakes.

-Fwoosh!

The Epiaux fortress, which I returned to via teleport, had become even more sinister than before.

The fierce blizzard surrounding the fortress created an even more eerie atmosphere, perhaps due to the beings inside.

"Where's Lydia?"

"I told her not to leave her room while the meeting was taking place."

"Good."

Damn it.

I didn't particularly care for that fellow, but because Eleris was taking care of her, I couldn't help but worry. She's scared out of her wits now, and we've come this far, so there's no room for foolish actions, despite the circumstances.

-Swish

I returned to the form of Valier using the ring of Sarkegaar.

This was my second act under the name of Valier, not Reinhardt.

Attending the Vampire Council.

A gathering of the lords from the five vampire families.

It was the same place where we played the mafia game during the last temple group mission. It felt eerie and amusing to think that now the place was filled with the so-called Vampire Lords, who could turn the entire continent upside down just by showing up.

As I opened the door to the meeting room, I saw that four people were already seated at the round table.

They didn't belong to the Demon World, so they didn't show any particular respect towards me.

Some looked at me with interest, some with disinterest, some seemed to look down on me, and some were unreadable.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Valier."

Considering my age and that they didn't belong to the Demon World, I decided to address them with a respectful tone, though not excessively polite.

And as soon as I sat down, a chilly laughter filled the conference room.

"So, the master of the nonexistent has arrived."

The nonexistent.

It must have been a reference to the now-vanished Darkland. I didn't bother responding to the provocation.

The vampire who mocked me was a pale-faced woman with seductive red lips.

Even setting her beauty aside, there was something distinctive about her.

I wasn't particularly surprised, having already heard about her from Eleris.

"Nice to meet you. I'm the lord of the Thursday Night of the Seven Nights, Luruien."

Long ears.

There could be only one explanation.

She was an elf.

A long-extinct elf, now living as a vampire.

It was clear that the Vampire Lords were ancient beings, even when simply speaking with the first Vampire Lord.

Not only was she an elf, but the presence next to her was even more astonishing.

"Pleased to meet you, young Demon King."

A profound voice came from the figure seated next to her.

"I am the lord of the Friday Night of the Seven Nights, Gallarush."

With a massive frame and rock-like, solid-textured skin, red eyes, and fang-like teeth protruding from his lower lip, he was an orc vampire.

Even just hearing about him had been strange, but the oppressive aura he exuded was no joke.

All Vampire Lords were said to be exceptional mages, but this one seemed like he should be wielding a stone axe instead.

Next, there was a vampire with a gaze full of curiosity looking at me.

"Hi Archdemon! I'm the lord of the Wednesday Night, Lucinil! Nice to meet you! I'll speak casually since I'm older. Okay?"

“…Uh, sure."

For some reason, this vampire was high-strung.

She appeared as a young girl, and her behavior was indeed childlike.

'While they all have their peculiarities, they aren't savage beings. Given their long lives, they are quite well-mannered. You could consider the lord of the Wednesday Night… harmless.'

She appeared as a young girl vampire, but…

She wasn't human to begin with.

Definitely.

I heard she was a Homunculus.

I never imagined a Homunculus could become a vampire. It was a mystery who created such a Homunculus, and how she became a vampire was also unknown.

Lucinil must be the most peculiar being among the Vampire Lords present here. Lucinil looked at me with a face full of curiosity.

And finally.

"It is an honor to meet such a distinguished being."

The elderly gentleman removed his fedora and bowed deeply to me.

"I am Antirianus, the lord of the Saturday Night of the Seven Nights."

He stared at me with an inscrutable smile.

I heard he was human.

Antirianus looked the most ordinary of those present, except for Eleris, and yet, he seemed the least ordinary.

In fact, Eleris warned me to be cautious of Antirianus. He said that his intentions were difficult to discern.

Tuesday’s Eleris

Wednesday's Lucinil.

Thursday's Luruien.

Friday's Gallarush.

And Saturday's Antirianus.

Five of the Seven Nights were present at the Vampire Council.

"Now, let's proceed with the council meeting attended by the Archdemon."

Antirianus declared the meeting open in a subdued tone.

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All five Vampire Clan heads looked at me.

"There's no point in beating around the bush. I need your help."

Of course, they must have expected me to say this.

What else could the last successor of a fallen nation say when seeking the support of forces from the borderlands?

Luruien opened her mouth, unfazed.

"I assume you know that we, the Vampire Council, did not participate in the Demon World War?"

"I am aware."

Luruien's lips curled into a sneer.

"Even when the former Archdemon and Demon King, Valier - the most powerful being in the world - was alive, the Vampire Council did not participate in the Demon World War. We didn't cooperate even when the Demon World was strong, so why would we join hands now that it has fallen?"

In other words, she was saying there was even less reason for them to help now than when their own homes were still intact.

Luruien gazed at the prince of a nonexistent world with a mocking smile.

Gallarush also stared at me calmly.

"The Vampire Council never owed anything to Darkland in the first place. Our existence and yours were never needed nor interfered with each other, and not even the strange power of the Archdemon could subdue us. That's why successive Demon Kings left us alone, and we never interfered in Darkland's affairs. It wasn't a written rule, but an unwritten one that lasted until the Lord of Tuesday swore loyalty to

Darkland."

Gallarush didn't mock me like Luruien, but he saw no reason to cooperate.

Next to speak was the little vampire, Lucinil, although she was not a child.

"Archdemon, what do you plan to do after rebuilding the Demon World?"

Lucinil innocently asked a more fundamental question.

"Do you want to kill all the humans? You can't do that. Human blood may not be the only thing we need, but there's nothing like it. I don't want to survive on tasteless blood."

"I have no intention of killing all humans, nor do I think that's possible."

"Really? So you mean to kill about half of them?"

Why was she so fixated on killing?

"I doubt I will have enough time in my life to restore even a fraction of Darkland's former power, let alone kill half the humans."

"Hmm, that makes sense. Since everything has completely collapsed… Even if an Archdemon lives longer than ordinary mortals, it would take a long time to reach the level of the previous Darkland… Hmm…"

Lucinil said this and then began tilting her head, seemingly deep in thought. Lastly, the Lord of Saturday Antirianus looked at me with a gentle smile.

"It's contradictory, isn't it, Your Greatness? You claim not to dream of war, yet you require power."

"Rebuilding would not be possible without the power to protect oneself."

"The Demon World War began not to destroy one another, but to defend ourselves. Of course, the humans were the ones who started the invasion."

It seemed as if he was suggesting that the power for self-defense was just an excuse.

"Once the humans witness the reassembling tribes of Darkland, they will trample them. Then we must bear the bloodshed to protect the still feeble forces of Darkland. The rationale and reason for doing so… I truly cannot fathom."

Luruien seemed to agree, nodding her head, and so did Gallarush.

Lucinil appeared lost in thought, not paying attention to the ongoing conversation.

"No matter how much I think about it, there's absolutely nothing for us to gain by cooperating with the Archdemon. Even if we desire something, the Archdemon simply cannot provide it."

Luruien's argument was valid. Though her scoffing was contemptuous, some things were simply inevitable.

The Vampire Council had no reason to cooperate with me, and they had nothing to gain from me. If an alliance was formed solely to receive help, there was no real reason to do it.

I had nothing to give, and they had nothing to gain.

"Changing the subject. Can I try something?"

At my words, Antirianus kindly smiled and nodded.

"For immortals, what remains is time. Give it a try."

"It seems that, with the end of the recent Demon War, the Five Great Religions are now seeking independence."

At my words, Luruien, of course, appeared perplexed, as did the others.

"What's the big deal about that?"

"The humans had united for the Demon War, but with its end, various military and interest groups began harboring different thoughts without disbanding. The prime example is the Holy Knight Order, which plans to establish an independent nation for the Five Great Religions."

Formation of an independent nation for the Five Great Religions.

Luruien and Gallarush's expressions hardened at those words. Divine power was an opposing force to the vampires. It seemed they couldn't help but feel tense at the prospect of a nation founded by the religious.

"Of course, I did kill Riverrier Lanze, the former Holy Knight Commander and the core figure of the independence-seeking faction, last time. I did it with Eleris here."

The threat had existed but vanished.

At my words, Luruien tilted his head.

"Since I've eliminated the faction's threat in advance, if you're grateful, cooperate… Is that what you're saying?"

Luruien asked if I meant that they owed me for eliminating an enemy they would eventually fear. I shook my head.

"Not at all. If I said that, wouldn't you just wipe your mouth and move on?"

"Yes, indeed."

Luruien narrowed her eyes as she stared at me.

"However, before Riverrier Lanze died, he said something. That he was willing to cooperate with me. He argued that if I truly wanted the Empire to weaken, I should have left him be."

"I see. That's what I was curious about as well. If you had left the anti-imperial faction alone, it would have been advantageous for you."

All things considered, it depends on how you connect the dots.

Although he claimed to have no interest in rebuilding the demon world, he ultimately sought the cooperation of the Vampire Council under the guise of reconstructing it, as if everything eventually came together in the end.

The reason for killing Riverrier Lanze also ultimately had its own purpose.

"If I leave it alone, the independent nation of the Five Great Religions will obviously fall into the hands of Riverrier Lanze. Why would I let that happen?"

"…?"

"Isn't it better for me to take it?"

At my words, everyone wore puzzled expressions, except for Eleris.

Eleris's mouth dropped open in shock, as if she understood what I was saying.

“…You're saying you want to absorb the power of the Five Great Religions? What kind of nonsense is that?"

In response to the question of how the Demon King could have such a bizarre idea and if it was even possible, I raised my hand on the table.

-Swoosh

"I am the Champion of Tu’an."

And upon seeing something in my hand, the already pale faces of the vampires turned even whiter.

"Ah, ahhhhhh! What, what is that?!"

-Bam!

Lucinil jumped up from her seat and fell backward.

Tiamata is like a panic button for the undead.

Eleris was startled when she first saw it, and even now she couldn't look at it properly.

Lucinil had fallen backward, Luruien retreated in shock, and Gallarush scowled fiercely.

"Ho, so you're the Champion of Tu’an."

Antirianus, on the other hand, seemed intrigued as he looked at the Tiamata in my

hand.

For the sake of the Lord Vampires, who might have a heart attack, I decided to unsummon Tiamata.

"I didn't mean to threaten you. But do you understand what I'm saying now?"

Having seen the thing they least wanted to see, everyone seemed to be out of breath.

"I thought my heart was going to drop, you brat!"

Lucinil, furious, jumped up and down in her spot, shouting at the top of her lungs.

"I apologize. But if I didn't show it to you, how could I prove it?"

"You should have at least warned us that you had something like Tiamata! Ugh! I'm so upset!"

Lucinil even showed Luruien the goosebumps on her arm.

"Tsk, that's not possible, Lucinil."

Seeing her like this, Luruien clicked her tongue and patted Lucinil's head.

"I'm telling you, I got goosebumps! Really!"

Anyway.

Everyone, except Antirianus, seemed to be on high alert due to the appearance of Tiamata. Even Eleris seemed to have trouble breathing.

"It seems to be especially dangerous for undead like us. I understand what you're saying now. As the Champion of Tu’an, you're saying you can become the master of the Five Great Religion's power?"

"I don't think it's impossible."

Although Riverrier Lanze wanted to put Olivia forward, I didn't think it was impossible for me to unite the power of the Five Great Religions under the name of Reinhardt and become their master.

"Very well, great being. Then, whether you control them from behind the scenes, become their actual master, or build an alliance with them, why did you seek the Council?"

Now we get to the main point.

With my arms crossed, I stared at their faces.

"If I become a representative of the Five Great Religions or something similar, I'll wipe you all out if you don't cooperate."

At those words, even Antirianus's expression stiffened.

"Isn't that a good picture?"

"The Champion of Tu’an, the Goddes of Purity, unites the Five Great Religions' forces to create a new power to exterminate the vampire forces, and becomes their leader."

"The goal is the eradication of the undead. The first target is the Vampire Lord families."

"If a large force of Holy Knights from the Holy Order starts to demolish your forces one by one, can you handle that?"

It's a threat made not as a Demon King but as the Champion of Tu’an.

"Are you threatening us, young Demon King?"

Gallarush glared at me with anger-filled eyes.

"As you all say, I have nothing to offer you. So, you are right when you say we can't make a deal in the first place."

"I have nothing to give, but I need your help. What else can I do?"

"It's a threat."

"I'm sorry. Do you think I'm happy to do this to the elders? When the pillars of my house have been ripped out, I have to do everything I can."

-Swoosh

Summoning Tiamata once again, I placed it on the table.

"Please help me. If not, I'll kill you all."

Finally, the smile disappeared from Luruien's lips, who had been mocking me all along.

"Wow, you're such an audacious brat that it's almost impressive."

Lucinil let out a sarcastic laugh, as if she couldn't believe it.

CHAPTER 338

The atmosphere, which was already cold, grew even colder at the bombshell declaration that if they didn't cooperate, I would join the Five Great Religions and begin hunting Vampire Lords with a grudge.

Lucinil stared at me with disbelief, her arms crossed.

"You think you can survive here talking like that? You don't value your life? You think we can't take your head off just because you have Tiamata?"

"Eleris will somehow manage it. She's managed to handle everything that's come up so far."

"Wha- what?!"

The most flustered by my words was Eleris herself.

It seemed she hadn't anticipated at all that I would go this far.

“…Don't you think you're being too reckless with your life?"

"Shouldn't I at least try? It's up to you to try to kill me, but you should be prepared for what happens next if I somehow manage to escape."

Although my words were fierce, I had no intention of actually fighting, so I unsummoned Tiamata.

I know that provoking their pride isn't the best approach.

But in the end, I didn't have any cards to play other than threats.

I had nothing to offer them and they had no reason to cooperate with me.

In plain words, if I could get them to help me by throwing away my pride and begging on the ground, I would do so.

But even doing that wouldn't win their cooperation.

So this is the best I can do.

"Technically, the Five Great Religions have greater power and scale, so it would be more advantageous for me to join them. However, I came to the Council first because I thought it would be polite to visit my closer neighbors first. And if I were to become the masked champion of the Tu'an and the mascot of the Five Great Religions, I would inevitably have no choice but to sever my ties with you."

As I shamelessly mentioned that I visited them first despite having a larger business partner, I felt like trash even to myself.

Gallarush couldn't hide his displeasure, and neither could Luruien.

The two seemed to have already developed hostility towards me for making such brazen remarks. Lucinil appeared to be the same.

"Let's cooperate."

However.

Unexpectedly, Antirianus expressed his willingness to cooperate.

Everyone was taken aback.

"…Huh? What? What did you say?"

But the most flustered one was me.

Why?

"Why are you surprised? You asked for cooperation, and I will cooperate. O great being."

Antirianus looked at me with a mysterious smile on his face. Lucinil shot a nervous glance at the old priest.

"Antirianus, what kind of dirty scheme are you up to?"

"It's just… isn't it interesting? One of the Five Great Religions' sacred relics, and not just any, but Tiamata itself, falling into the hands of an Archdemon?"

The old priest smiled at me.

"Can't you feel the malice of the gods?"

For the first time in history, a demon had become the master of Tiamata - even an Archdemon at that.

"Even if the Demon King loses everything in vain, or achieves every dream, there will always be interesting things happening. How could I not follow?"

Antirianus's eyes were filled with deep malice.

The misfortune of others, their happiness, sorrow, and joy.

Such malice, wanting to relieve eternal boredom by witnessing these things.

"Are you out of your mind? Antirianus."

At Gallarush's words, Antirianus could only grin.

I seemed to understand why Eleris had warned me to be careful of Antirianus. He was the only Vampire Lord who had agreed to cooperate with me, but strangely enough, I felt like I was stunned.

It was fortunate that I had heard him say he would cooperate, but I hadn't anticipated that it would unravel in such an odd context.

"If someone who has lived for such a long time is still sane, wouldn't that be more of a problem?"

Antirianus's words, implying that every decision he made was bound to be as insane as the decisions of a madman after living for an unimaginable amount of time, were surprisingly persuasive.

"So, as the lord of Saturday and the ruler of the clan, Antirianus, I will cooperate with the Demon King. Surely more interesting things will happen than during the Great Demon War, right? So, consider any harm done to the Demon King as harm done to

me."

"I really don't know what he's thinking, do you? Right, Luruien?"

“…Is it for a day or two?"

It seemed that this wasn't the first time Antirianus had pulled such antics. After deciding to cooperate, Antirianus tapped the table with his index finger.

"Anyway, as immortals, we have plenty of time. There's no need to decide everything right here and now. So, wouldn't it be okay to take a few days and slowly discuss things?"

Antirianus stared at me as he spoke.

I could sense his intention to take a short break, cool our heads, and have some separate conversations.

It was good for me.

There's nothing more terrifying than unexplained kindness.

The pouring out of that unexplained kindness made it feel even more like he was strangling me.

I felt a strange sense of pressure.

"You! You little Archdemon brat. Let's have a chat."

Lucinil gestured at me as if this was a good opportunity. Eleris nodded at me, as if to say it was alright.

It seemed that the kindest person in this place had ended up disliking me the most.

Due to Antirianus's mediation, the council meeting came to a temporary halt. Regardless of his intentions, the fact that he had decided to cooperate had caused a ripple effect, changing the atmosphere.

Upon leaving the meeting room, Lucinil instructed me to follow her and silently led the way.

The silver-haired, red-eyed Homunculus Vampire.

The Lord of Wednesday.

Eleris had said that Lucinil was the least harmful among them, but just by looking at her outward appearance, it was clear that she seemed the most upset.

"Where did you learn such terrible things? Did the Demon King teach you that?"

I had been making a cheeky remark, but since I had no real thoughts about the previous Demon King, I didn't feel angry.

"How can one change their nature?"

Lucinil took the lead, stopping in front of a window that showed the blizzard raging outside. She turned to look at me.

"You won't get anything good from that."

Lucinil stared at me in silence for a moment.

"It doesn't matter to Antirianus or me that we agreed to cooperate with you, but Luruien and Gallarush will be very angry."

"I suppose. But does it really matter? This is the only thing I can do after all."

"We might die before we even rebuild the Demon World."

The idea of threatening the Vampire Lords and getting killed for it was absurd. However, Lucinil's warning made me feel more certain that Eleris's words weren't far off.

"I was interested in Valier's successor, but I'll remember you as an arrogant, thick-headed, and overconfident oddball."

Due to my many flaws, Lucinil seemed to have a very negative perception of me.

"Keep in mind that I agreed to cooperate with you not because you're pretty, but because I owe Eleris a personal debt."

Still, Lucinil seemed to have decided to work with me.

A debt to Eleris.

I didn't bother asking what it was. It didn't seem like she would tell me anyway. Lucinil glared at me, biting her lip in irritation.

"Ugh, Eleris must have known I'd end up like this."

I didn't know what debt she owed, but Eleris had let me into the Vampire Council because she knew Lucinil would reluctantly agree to cooperate due to that debt. Her words about me being harmless likely had a similar context.

The Lords of Wednesday and Saturday.

Both promised to cooperate with me for their own reasons. Lucinil crossed her arms and cocked her head.

"Anyway, you've now secured the cooperation of three out of the five families, right? Isn't that enough? Why don't you stop making a fuss and go back?"

She seemed to think that my continued attendance at the Council would only aggravate Luruien and Gallarush without yielding any benefits.

"Shouldn't I try to persuade them all since I've come this far?"

"I thought you might. You're such a shameless fellow."

Lucinil clicked her tongue and sighed.

"Follow me."

As if to say there was no more to discuss here, Lucinil dragged me away.

Leaving the palace building, Lucinil walked through the deep snow.

-Whoosh

Naturally, walking through the piled snow with her small frame, her feet sank in, and she couldn't walk properly.

"Ugh."

-Bam!

With a wave of Lucinil's hand, a shockwave exploded, sending the accumulated snow flying in all directions.

"The Council really chose the wrong place for this. Why on earth did they build the palace where it snows all year round? It doesn't make any sense."

“…Maybe the palace wasn't here when the Council chose this place?"

"This place was built a very long time ago, back when there were Sunday and Monday. No one even knows exactly when that was. Of course, there have been many renovations since then. It was quite primitive in the beginning."

Lucinil grumbled, as if the location of the Council had nothing to do with her. She led the way through the snowstorm, and I followed.

"I'm not sure if this is the right expression, but I'd like to know the order of seniority. Can you tell me?"

"Seniority? Oh, you mean our ages?"

"Yes."

Lucinil casually spread out her fingers as if it was no secret.

"As you can see, Luruien is the oldest. Then comes Gallarush, followed by Eleris, then me, and finally Antirianus."

Lucinil and I left the main palace and arrived at an area that could be called a secondary palace.

"Ugh, even low-ranking spirits keep clinging to this place. Why is the territory so bad?"

-Heeheehee…

As if driven mad by the wailing of ghosts from all around, Lucinil clapped her hands, causing the spirits to vanish into thin air.

It's quite strange to hear a vampire complain about their territory.

"Even if they're not dayflies, they keep coming back when chased away."

In a reception room-like area of the secondary palace, Lucinil sat on an old sofa, and I sat across from her.

"Assuming I don't know what Antirianus is plotting, you'd like to persuade Luruien and Gallarush too, right?"

"If it's possible."

"Listen, little Archdemon. We've all lived for such a long time that it's difficult to measure. You understand, right?"

"I suppose so?"

"So, how did we all become vampires?"

It's impossible to be born a vampire.

Each of them had a life before becoming a vampire. Luruien would have been an elf, Gallarush an orc, and Lucinil a homunculus.

"Isn't it different for each of you?"

"It can't be that different."

Resting her chin on the armrest of the sofa, Lucinil glanced at me.

"It's because we didn't want to die."

The five great Vampire Lords.

The reason they became vampires was simply because they didn't want to die.

It wasn't that I expected a grand reason, but the fact that it all boiled down to this felt somewhat odd.

"Antirianus said he debated between becoming a lich or a vampire and chose to become a vampire. He thought living as bones would be more inconvenient than not being able to see the sun. But as a VampireLord, he can see the sun, although it's painful. So, he's quite lucky. Anyway, they all became vampires because they didn't want to die."

No.

That reason, in its own way, felt a bit eerie.

"I used to be a Homunculus. A Homunculus is an unstable magical lifeform. I was quite exceptionally stable, but I couldn't know my specific lifespan, and the prospect of facing death someday was too terrifying. So, in order to avoid death, I tried various methods, and the last one I chose was becoming a vampire. Similarly, it was because I didn't want to die."

Lucinil looked at me.

Then, she seemed to be about to say something but closed her mouth instead.

"Anyway, the specific reasons may vary, but ultimately, we all became vampires because we didn't want to die."

Lucinil didn't explain the circumstances of Luruien, Gallarush, and Eleris, but she said that they all became vampires as a refuge from their fear of death.

"So, your threat is in a way the most effective approach to us. After all, our greatest fear is death."

The only way to get through to immortals, who have had almost everything they could want over the long course of time, is to threaten them with their lives. They fear death, after all.

"But that's only possible to a certain extent. We have truly lived for a very, very long time. We were not the only lords for generations; the lords have changed several times. How do you think that happened?"

"I don't know."

"There's no way that vampires like us would be hunted or killed."

I read something in Lucinil's eyes.

"Suicide?"

"Yes."

Boredom.

"Most of the time, the replacement of the lords of the five families happened in such cases. Well, there are other cases, but you don't need to know about those."

It's impossible for powerful vampires hiding far away from the world to be killed. They don't even expose their existence to the world.

So, there's no way for the lords to be replaced except by giving up on life themselves.

"So, does that mean they're not afraid of death in the end?"

While becoming a vampire was due to the fear of losing one's life, if a Lord Vampire eventually grows weary of living for so long, then threatening their life won't yield any results, will it?

"No, it's the opposite."

Lucinil revealed a subtle smile.

"Despite living for so long, despite life becoming weary to the point of exhaustion…"

Sadness filled the eyes of the vampire.

"They still have a reason to live."

So, coming back to the point, the current lords must be beings who still have at least one reason to live.

The fact that they haven't given up on life is already proof of that.

Lucinil was giving me information.

CHAPTER 339

An excessively long life inevitably brings boredom, and for that reason, the weary Vampire Lords turned their backs on the world.

Lucinil advised that there must be at least one reason for the five ruling lords, who still cling to this undoubtedly tiresome life, to continue living.

Thus, their lives remained precious to them.

"Of course, even if you were to kill us, it would only be a minor annoyance, but if that were truly possible, Luruien and Gallarush might cooperate. After all, your lifetime is but a brief moment for us, and by helping you during that time, we avoid troublesome matters and clear a debt to the Darkland, which isn't such a bad deal."

The Demon World and the Council have a relationship where they watch each other closely, but the Council could help reconstruct Darkland in exchange for clearing their debt.

Furthermore, I, the Demon King possess Tiamata, so I can bother them whenever I please. In fact, three of the ruling lords have already promised to cooperate with me.

Luruien and Gallarush have become a minority faction. Lucinil narrows her brow as she looks at me.

"So, since I decided to cooperate with you, the situation should naturally work in your favor. Don't spout nonsense like you did earlier. Understood?"

"I'm not one to act without reason, so don't worry."

"No, you are one to act without reason. It's written all over your face."

…How did she know?

Is it because the traces of my words and actions so far remain visible on Eleri's face? And is it even appropriate for a vampire from Homunculus to discuss physiognomy?

Anyway, it seemed like Lucinil was going to be on my side from the beginning, thanks to Eleris, and Antirianus has also decided to join my side.

As for the other Vampire Lords… frankly, I still don't know much about them.

"How on earth did Eleris choose someone like you as her master… Sigh."

Why is she so kind?

Although she grumbles, she still explains everything to me and even offers advice. She's not just harmless but also likable.

Whether I'm disconcerted by her excessive kindness or not, Lucinil no longer seems to care, as she lies down on the sofa with his arms folded.

She said that the other Vampire Lords have reasons to keep living.

That means Lucinil has indirectly confessed that she has at least one reason to live as well.

"I don't know if I can ask this."

"If you're hesitating, it's polite not to ask, Archdemon."

"What's your reason for living, Lucinil?"

"You're going to ask anyway? You really have no tact."

Lucinil frowns and glares at me.

"Why? If I tell you, can you help me somehow?"

"Can't I at least share your burden?"

"You speak eloquently. You really do."

With her arms still folded, Lucinil gazes quietly at the high ceiling of the chamber. Lucinil then mumbled, as if it wasn't much of a secret.

"I want a soul."

At those vague words, I felt as if my breath was being choked off.

In that single phrase, I sensed the immeasurable sorrow of living as a Homunculus for an eternity, and the need to continue living as a vampire.

I want a soul.

What could that mean?

I don't want to be human, nor anything else; I just want a soul.

I don't know if only intelligent species possess souls, or if some life forms have them and others don't.

One thing is certain.

A created being like a Homunculus would not have a soul.

Lucinil wants what she lacks within herself. She turned her head towards me and smiled.

"Is it pathetic? A being of this level only dreams of having that?"

“…No, not really?"

I believe it's a desperate issue in its own way. Of course, I cannot fully empathize.

She wants a soul.

Lucinil never explained why she wanted it.

"It's just something like that. It's not like I can't live or die because of it."

Her attitude in saying that was nonchalant. She spoke as if it was a mere wish, without any great longing or desire.

However.

Lucinil must have lived an immeasurably long time with just that one desire.

While Valier conversed with Lucinil at the Star Palace, Eleris was talking with Antirianus.

"Antirianus."

"Yes, Eleris."

"What's your scheme?"

At that, the old sage smiled, seemingly at a loss for words.

"I have nothing to say if you ask me my scheme when I've simply offered to help because the Demon King needs it. Hehe."

"At the Great Demon War conference, you stated without hesitation that you had no intention of cooperating. But now, you're willing to cooperate, which naturally raises suspicion, doesn't it?"

It was natural for Luruien and Gallarush to react as they did.

That's why it was strange for Antirianus to decide to help without any hesitation.

"Well…"

The old sage still wore a soft, benevolent smile.

"The Great Demon War was not interesting, but this side seems to be fun."

"…Fun?"

"Yes, fun."

Antirianus, who had been smiling all along, cautiously opened his eyes.

The red eyes of the vampire gazed at Eleris.

"To endure such a terribly long time, don't we need this kind of entertainment once in a while?"

"Entertainment… you say?"

Although he had agreed to cooperate, Antirianus was approaching this as a way to kill time. And that was Eleris's disgust.

"You should… choose your words… more carefully… Antirianus."

"Ah, my apologies, Eleris. I had no intention of belittling or disrespecting you… But why get so angry? Whether I cooperate sincerely or consider it entertainment and cooperate."

-Tap tap

The old sage tapped the floor of the castle with the end of his staff and smiled.

"Isn't it true that I'm offering to help?"

The old sage left those words behind and brushed past Eleris. Eleris quietly stared at the retreating figure of Antirianus.

Gaining the Council's help would be as good as acquiring an army of ten thousand, but…

Would it really be right to join hands with that sinister vampire?

Eleris couldn't be certain.

There was time until the Council reached a conclusion, so I had to stay in the Epiaux fortress for at least a few days.

"Hey, Archdemon."

“…What?"

Just when I thought she lost interest, she appeared suddenly before me, walking down the corridor, and started following me around.

"Aren't you grateful that I'm helping you?"

“…I am, but why?"

Lucinil stared at me intently.

"I'm a bit curious about the taste of Archdemon blood. Can I just have a little taste?"

"What, what are you saying!"

I was on the verge of a fit due to her sudden remark.

Is that something you can say so casually, like asking for a glass of water?

"No, I won't turn you into a vampire. I just want a taste. Just a little bit. Oh, I'm really curious. Really. Can't you do that for me?"

"No way! What are you even talking about!"

"Just a little! Really, just a little! Huh? I'm just curious. Who said I'd devour you?"

Terrifying.

But before that, if she really tried to turn me into a vampire, would it actually happen?

Isn't that too scary?

Only then did I truly feel that I was face-to-face with some of the highest-ranking vampires.

I'm not going to get into trouble here, am I?

She seems kind, but is she really? She won't suddenly bite my neck and say, "Now you're my slave!" right?

But, on the other hand…

She seems like a child.

If she bites me, the whole thing about just taking a bit of blood seems like it would fit the picture.

Suddenly, I imagined myself being bitten in the neck by Gallarush.

Isn't that not just sucking, but being devoured…?

Did I make a mistake coming here?

"Ah! Are you really an Archdemon, acting so petty like this?"

"Stop saying such absurd things!"

I ran down the corridor of the fortress, and Lucinil followed me annoyingly with her short-range teleportation.

"Hey! Just give it to me! Give it!"

She clung to my waist, making strange noises.

In the end…

I went to find Eleris with Lucinil hanging on my waist.

"Lucinil…"

Eleris looked down at the small vampire with a cold expression, knowing that she wanted my blood.

"What can I do if I'm really curious!"

Lucinil threw a tantrum, arguing that there was no chance she would ever taste Archdemon blood.

"Your Highness… Instead of sucking blood directly, if you collect the blood in a container and she drinks from it… I can allow her to taste it, but… it's not a good idea if it harms your body."

Ah.

There was such a method, after all. Upon hearing it, Lucinil looked at me with an expression of surprise.

"Oh, that should work! Hey, just perfect."

"What, you want me to do what now?"

The vampire lord used a slightly different approach than I had experienced so far.

In the end, we bickered for quite some time, and ultimately, I was the one who gave in.

If I didn't, I had a feeling Lucinil would try to sink her teeth into my neck while I slept.

To be honest, I was scared, so I surrendered.

"I don't know why I have to do this, but since you're helping me, I'll do it."

"Mm-hmm."

Eventually, I cut my own flesh and bled into a bowl that Lucinil had brought. Eleris looked on anxiously, as if worried something might go wrong.

The strange thing was, by now, I didn't find this level of pain particularly bothersome.

"Ah, that's… the wound is… Uh! It's… too deep!"

I was fine, but Eleris couldn't help but be restless.

I let a few drops of my blood fall, and Lucinil licked the bowl clean before looking at me.

Her expression was somewhat bitter.

"Metallic."

That was her only comment on the taste.

I couldn't understand why I was getting angry at the remark that my blood tasted bad.

It was annoying for no reason.

Eleris helped me stop the bleeding from the wound on my arm. Tiamata's divine power couldn't be used in ordinary situations.

Lucinil, grumbling that the taste of Archdemon blood was metallic, left as if her task was finished.

We had no choice but to eat since we would be here for several days.

And I wasn't the only one who needed food.

Lydia Schmitt was here too.

We shared a meal with Lydia Schmitt using the preserved food Eleris had brought. Lydia froze upon seeing me but, upon hearing that we were here to eat, she kept quiet and ate while glancing around.

"A lot has happened since then, huh?"

I wondered if Lydia had chosen this place or not, but her room was quite spacious.

The crackling sound of the fireplace filled the room, and the warmth circulated around. There were items that hadn't been there before, such as a bed, sofa, and desk.

Eleris seemed to be trying to provide as many necessary items as possible for someone who would be living in isolation.

It was because the environment was so extreme.

Based on the size of the room and the living conditions, one could believe this was a royal residence.

In fact, this was a palace.

"Once the council concludes, you'll be able to move around freely. Bear with the inconvenience for now."

“…Yes."

As she glanced at Eleris, Lydia quietly nibbled on a piece of bread.

CHAPTER 340

The night in the Epiaux fortress was harsh.

The relentless snowstorm showed no signs of stopping. However, Epiaux was peculiarly well-insulated, preventing drafts from entering.

Of course, that didn't mean warmth circulated within the castle, making the nights in Epiaux even colder and more chilling.

Nevertheless, the true masters of this place were unaffected by such cold.

Night in Epiaux.

The Elf Vampire Luruien and the Orc Vampire Gallarush were seated facing each other in the conference room.

"Lucinil will likely cooperate, right?"

"Yes, she's been feeling guilty for not participating in the Great Demon War alongside Eleris."

"Hmm. I'll accept that about Lucinil, but…"

Luruien narrowed her eyes as she gazed towards the corridor.

"I just can't figure out what Antirianus is thinking."

Luruien's long ears drooped. The Vampire Council didn't convene often, but they had existed for a very long time.

Though they didn't see each other frequently, they couldn't help but observe one another for ages, except for Antirianus, who had relatively recently ascended to the position of Vampire Lord.

As a result, Gallarush knew that Luruien's drooping ears were a reaction to worry or being sullen.

"He's an enigma. The circumstances of his ascension as Lord are also questionable."

At Gallarush's words, Luruien's ears perked up.

“…So you've been thinking the same thing."

"Weren't you somewhat suspicious as well?"

"Well, I've heard that Antirianus has been involved in several inscrutable actions, but I can't be certain…”

Luruien's response seemed hesitant, to which Gallarush nodded.

"I see. But I am certain."

Gallarush's red eyes stared intently at Luruien.

"It's clear that he killed the previous Lord of Saturday."

“…Why would he do that?"

"If Maximilia had chosen death as Antirianus claims and Antirianus was her successor, then it would have been after she created the Philosopher's Stone. But that never happened."

“…Right."

A reason to live.

The previous Lord of Saturday's goal was to create the legendary Philosopher's Stone, the pinnacle of alchemy. To achieve this, she became a vampire and the Lord of Saturday.

After striving for so long and suddenly dying without completing her mission, Antirianus appeared, claiming to be the successor. Amidst these suspicious circumstances, Gallarush had been doubting Antirianus from the start.

Maximilia didn't choose death; she was murdered by Antirianus.

At Gallarush's words, Luruien tilted her head.

"But is it even possible for a family member to kill their Lord? That should be impossible."

"Antirianus was a mage before he became a vampire."

“…Right."

"He may have found a way. A method to avoid being controlled."

Gallarush, struggling to cross his muscular arms, murmurs quietly.

"Antirianus became a vampire and became the lord of Saturday in just 20 years. That's suspicious, isn't it?"

“…Indeed, it is."

Twenty years is a long time, but for them, it's like the blink of an eye. In their eyes, it seems as if Antirianus had become the lord of Saturday as soon as he had joined them.

There are suspicions that Antirianus had killed the previous lord and taken her place.

In the end, it's the business of another family, so there's no reason for them to interfere. Even if they did, it's an internal family matter.

However, regardless of the facts, they both agree that Antirianus is dangerous and his intentions are unclear.

That's why Eleris is cautious about Antirianus, who willingly offers his cooperation.

"But to cooperate with the Demon King this time…”

Gallarush murmurs with a serious expression.

An orc's serious expression is quite different from that of a human.

From a human's perspective, it looks as if he's contemplating who to chew up and kill.

"Who knows if he plans to kill the Demon King and become the new Demon King when Darkland is restored?"

“…Oh, come on. He's not an Archdemon."

Luruien shakes her head slightly, as if to say that's too simple of a thought. Gallarush murmurs towards Luruien.

"There are many ways. Countless."

At those words, Luruien's ears tremble as if she's shuddering. Possessing an Archdemon means possessing the demon realm. Regardless of whether Antirianus has a reason to do so, there would be ways if he intended to.

Mages, as a race, find ways even when there aren't any. Gallarush, with his arms crossed, seems to have come to a decision as his eyes widen.

"I'll cooperate. If only to keep an eye on Antirianus."

“…What?!"

Luruien's eyes widen at the sudden decision.

"I can't stand by and watch his suspicious actions any longer."

“…I didn't know Gallarush disliked Antirianus so much."

"Luruien, I dislike you more. Why do you keep forgetting what you already knew, forcing me to explain it to you?"

Oblivion.

At that, Luruien laughs.

"That's how I can endure time."

Every 200 years, Luruien erases all but the most necessary memories.

That's how she can continue to exist without going mad, despite being the oldest living among all the Vampire Lords.

Because of that, Gallarush cannot help but get angry whenever he has to explain something to Luruien, who has forgotten past events.

It's not an attitude of not needing to mention old things. She actively asks about what happened in the past, annoyingly. It's as if she finds it extremely amusing to hear about what she, herself, did in the past, without any knowledge of it.

Gallarush is fed up with that.

"Do you know why Maximilia tried to create the Philosopher's Stone?"

"Could it be… Ah, right. Was it Lucinil?"

"Yes."

Gallarush answers quietly.

"It was to give a soul to Lucinil."

The Philosopher's Stone, said to be capable of causing any miracle.

It's the final destination of alchemy, and although everyone knows that it doesn't actually exist, it's an item that alchemists dream of at least once. The previous Lord of Saturday, Maximilia, pursued it.

That's why Gallarush couldn't believe that Antirianus, who suddenly appeared, claimed that The previous lord of Saturday had taken her own life.

If Antirianus had killed Maximilia.

"Hmm."

Luruien's ears perked up, and she showed a subtle smile.

"So, you're worried about Lucinil, not the Demon King or the demon world?"

At her subtle laugh, Gallarush scowled as if her words were not even worth getting angry over.

"I had something like a friendship with Maximilia."

Though his face was fierce enough to terrify six hardened warriors, Luruien's expression was like that of someone teasing a child.

"That's all."

Gallarush emphasized, as if to prevent any misunderstandings. Luruien looked at Gallarush with a twinkling expression, as if she found his words amusing.

"What about me?"

"Our relationship is just annoying."

"How disappointing…"

Luruien's ears drooped down, crestfallen.

Following Lucinil's advice, I didn't babble any nonsense or say anything provocative to Gallarush and Luruien, as the situation was going favorably.

I already considered it a great success to have gained the cooperation of two Vampire Lords. I had no intention of attacking them if they ultimately refused to cooperate.

"We'll cooperate."

However, the next morning, when Gallarush said he would cooperate, I couldn't help but be surprised.

What happened?

Had there been some change of heart overnight?

For what reason?

But that fierce-looking orc vampire didn't seem to have submitted to a threat of murder, nor did he seem to have suddenly developed any goodwill towards me.

It's the same feeling as when Antirianus offered to help. Why does it feel like I'm getting a bargain?

"Working together is definitely more fun!"

Lucinil hopped excitedly and clung to Gallarush's muscular arm.

It looked like a cicada clinging to the enormous arm of that giant.

"Don't bother me."

-Whack!

"Ouch!"

Of course, when Gallarush swung his arm, Lucinil was pathetically thrown off.

"Ouch, that hurts, you monster!"

"I told you, I don't like it when people cling to me. And don't call me a monster."

Lucinil complained, but Gallarush seemed to be used to it and ignored her completely.

This is the feeling.

Among the aged Vampire Lords, the one with a childlike appearance acts like a real child, the other elderly vampires watch her antics as if they were watching their granddaughter's playfulness, and only Gallarush finds this situation utterly loathsome.

That's it.

Could it be that this was just a gathering of elderly vampires who were past their prime?

The Vampire Council…

Perhaps it wasn't such a formal occasion after all.

It felt so strange, like watching a bizarre role-playing game, that it was almost painful.

Among the elderly gathered, was there one who suffered from severe dementia and behaved like a baby?

Of course, Eleris might not know, but once they returned to their own territory, they would likely be a lord vampire with subordinates, so they wouldn't be living alone.

"Anyway, I will fully cooperate with you as well."

"Then… naturally, there's only one left."

Following Antirianus's words, everyone's gaze naturally shifted to the last remaining person.

The elf vampire, Luruien.

“…How did I become the minority in just one day?"

Even when she laughed at the idea of the nonexistent king's arrival, Luruien was the only one not on my side in this gathering.

No matter the specific circumstances, Luruien had become a lone duck in this situation.

"Ah, no… If I say I'll cooperate here, I'll feel like I'm being swept up in the atmosphere and acting without thinking…”

Luruien sighed deeply, furrowing her brow as if annoyed, and stomped her foot.

"Whew… Well, Gallarush did say yesterday that he would side with you, and I did think about it. I did, but…”

Luruien shrugged their shoulders.

"You should know that I'll only help to a certain extent. I won't swear loyalty or anything like that. If you demand a military-deity relationship or something like that, it'll be tiresome for you."

It was loose cooperation, not loyalty.

But considering who the ally was, that much was enough. Antirianus looked at me

with a satisfied smile.

"Now you hold the power of the five vampire houses. Oh, great being."

I was the one who asked for help, and I achieved my goal.

However, I couldn't help but feel that the situation was unfolding as Antirianus wanted it to.

Still, it was a success.

I managed to form an alliance with the five vampire lords of the Vampire Council, all bare-handed.

I didn't expect the outcome to be this good. I thought it would be a great success if I could confirm the cooperation of just one or two, but in the end, I succeeded in getting all the Vampire Lords to cooperate.

What's important is that while their cooperation is good, I should not be overly optimistic about it. I must accept the fact that they are not entirely on my side.

It's not a military-deity relationship, but rather cooperation.

Among them, I felt Antirianus, who called me a great being and was the most submissive, was the most uncomfortable.

Of course, I didn't just gain the power of the Vampire Lords.

I also gained the influence they held.

Antirianus explained to me about the families of each house.

The Council was just a meeting place, not where they lived.

Luruien had a stronghold in a large coniferous forest region called Rainwood, located in the northwest of the continent.

Gallarush had established his base in a desert region called Gelkorgis in the southern

part of the continent.

Antirianus had mentioned that he had chosen a village in the province of Alphanera, one of the vassal states of the empire, as his base.

These three had their own factions, whether near or far from the human world.

"I believe you may have expected this to some extent, but I am alone."

Eleris said that she was the only one in her Tuesday faction. It was not surprising, as Eleris had never mentioned her faction even though she was the Lord of Tuesday.

"Same here."

Lucinil, too, had no faction. One could have anticipated this, as her appearance suggested that she wouldn't be able to lead a group.

Powerful Vampire Lords, and their factions as well.

It felt as if I had gained an army with just a few words.

The fact that I had become increasingly involved in dangerous affairs and had achieved some success in them sent shivers down my spine.

Now, I could really wage a war.

The weight of that thought made it hard to breathe. But I couldn't hesitate. Somehow, I had decided to stop the Gate catastrophe.

"Strictly speaking, I sought you out not for your strength but for your knowledge."

As if to ask what that was, they all stared at me intently.

Could this really be the key?

If it was the right key, I would be freed from all the troubles that had plagued me thus far.

Hoping that it would all start here.

"First, do you know how to open a dimensional gate to another world?"

I asked the powerful Vampire Lords and magicians if they knew the secret that could free me from my terrible fate.

"Second, if you don't know, do you know of any magical experts who might know, and their whereabouts? Perhaps someone like a member of the Black Order or Cantus Magna."

At that, they all wore incredulous expressions, which was to be expected.

"A dimensional gate to another world?"

Luruien cocked her head.

"Why are you curious about that?"

Gallarush demonstrated the bewildered expression an orc would make.

“…I've never heard such an absurd idea in my life."

Lucinil seemed to have given up on understanding.

"Another world…”

Antirianus wore an intrigued expression.

The crux of the matter was why I wanted to know about such a thing.

They wouldn't believe that it was to save the world, and I had originally sought their cooperation for the purpose of rebuilding the demon realm.

"Darkland has lost much of its power. We've suffered nearly irreversible losses. Even with your cooperation, it would be difficult to bring down the empire."

As flimsy as it sounded, I had no choice but to say it.

"That's why I want to join forces with beings from other worlds."

It seemed like a far-fetched statement, like I wanted to summon an army from

another world since there were too few who would support me in reality.

It was inevitable that my words would elicit even more baffled expressions from them.

—---

There was a commotion.

They protested that what I was saying made no sense, that the existence of another world was uncertain at best, and even if it did exist, there was no reason for them to help me.

In particular, Luruien and Gallarush were visibly alarmed, having suspected that I was strange, but now certain that I was mad.

Their reaction was that I was so absurd, it was even becoming frightening.

Lucinil stared at me, wide-eyed.

This kid must be truly insane.

That seemed to be the conclusion she had come to.

Antirianus, on the other hand, found my words so unexpected that he couldn't help but chuckle.

His laughter was rather eerie.

"Well, if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. There's no harm in trying, right? Besides, no one else has any other solution, do they?"

There's no harm in trying.

The matter was only at that level, so why not discuss it? Although it wasn't a topic to bring up lightly, in the end, it was the only excuse I had.

So, they answered my first question, whether they knew or not.

Judging by the expressions of Luruien, Gallarush, and Lucinil, it seemed that none of

them had ever considered such a thing.

Antirianus was no different.

The Vampire Council knew nothing about how to travel to another world.

"Alright, if you don't know, that's fine. What about the next question?"

Information about a mage who might know such things.

Their reactions were lukewarm once again. No matter how long they had lived, these immortals were living somewhat jaded lives.

Therefore, they couldn't be expected to be sensitive to information from the world.

However.

"As for Cantus Magna, I once worked with them."

Antirianus suddenly mentioned this.

"R-really?!"

"Yes, Lucinil."

The one who blurted out in surprise wasn't me, but Lucinil.

From the looks of it, the other Vampire Lords present were also taken aback, unable to hide their astonishment.

"It was before I became a vampire, though……."

Antirianus turned out to be the key to reaching Cantus Magna.

CHAPTER 341

Antirianus had once been active within Cantus Magna, although he did not know much about it.

Lucinil, more flustered than I, suddenly stood up and asked urgently, "Is it… is it okay? It's not a place you can easily leave, right?"

"Of course, it's not that simple, Lucinil."

Beyond the glint in his eyes, Antirianus' body seemed to sway as if on the verge of falling towards Lucinil.

"So how did you get out?"

"They demanded the price of my life for attempting to escape from their clutches."

Antirianus spread his arms wide to demonstrate.

They had tried to kill him to prevent his escape, yet he was alive now.

It was clear that he wanted to know what had happened. Antirianus had been a member of Cantus Magna, had escaped, and fought in the process.

Even before becoming a vampire, he was already quite formidable. Lucinil stood agape.

"Antirianus, why did you join Cantus Magna in the first place?"

Eleris, who had been observing the situation, suddenly asked him.

"Well… I wanted to become an immortal being."

He pointed to his own body.

The body of a Vampire Lord.

"Not this half-hearted immortality, but true eternal life."

So he considered even the body of a vampire, which had overcome the sun, to be only half immortal?

According to what Lucinil had heard, Antirianus had debated between becoming a lich or a vampire and ultimately chose the latter, as it seemed less inconvenient.

The fact that he appeared as an old man indicated that he had failed to find a complete method for immortality while he was still human, and thus became a vampire.

"I don't really have the right to say this, but it seems like Antirianus can casually discuss such unpleasant things."

At Lucinil's words, Antirianus burst into laughter.

"Haha, isn't every existence somewhat unpleasant? Especially for us."

None of the other Vampire Lords objected to his words. Luruien looked at Antirianus with interest.

"So, did you find a method for immortality?"

"I don't know."

Everyone's expressions became strange again at his words.

What do you mean, you don't know?

"Cantus Magna collects forbidden spells, but not for their own use. They don't even examine what they possess, so they forget what magic they have as generations pass. I tried to study their secret arts when I had the chance, but I was discovered halfway through, and that's when I severed my ties with Cantus Magna."

He had entered the magical order to seek immortality, but was ultimately discovered and forced into battle before escaping.

It was somewhat disconcerting how he nonchalantly described himself as a prime example of a wicked mage.

But perhaps this was only fitting for the past of a Vampire Lord.

Antirianus, who had sought a perfect method for immortality only to fail and choose between becoming a lich or a vampire, ultimately chose the latter.

It had a somewhat ugly feeling, but since it was said so plainly, it didn't feel that ugly.

"Why do they collect the forbidden spells then? If they're not going to use them and they'll forget what they have?"

Lucinil asked.

"Could it be… like the rumors floating around, that they're sealing dangerous magic to protect the world… is that true?"

Luruien inquired.

What is the purpose of the Forbidden Spell Hunter, Cantus Magna?

I didn't know either, so I was curious to hear what Antirianus would say. The magic fanatics had their own purposes, not being particularly good nor evil.

"No, absolutely not, Luruien. Haha… They definitely don't have such noble intentions."

Antirianus laughed as if he had heard something amusing, and Luruien seemed irritated, her ears perking up and glaring at Antirianus.

"Then what's their goal?"

At Gallarush's question, Antirianus wiped away his laughter and spoke softly.

"It's for the completion of Akasha."

“…Akasha?"

Even the Vampire Lords looked puzzled, as if they had never heard of it before.

If it's Akasha, I think I know.

The Akashic Records, or something like that. Of course, I'm not sure if it precisely matches the concept I remember.

"I'm not sure if it should be called an artifact… but of course, I don't know what it looks like either. However, Akasha is an artifact for containing magic. The goal of Cantus Magna is to complete such a peculiar object. It's impossible to know how much it needs to be filled, though."

"So, to be precise, they're not hunting forbidden spells, but rather stuffing magic into it to fill its capacity. Since they've already put completed spells in, they need to add new ones, so they have no choice but to search for forbidden spells. Of course, they're developing new spells on their own, but forbidden spells have complex rituals and convoluted structures, so the capacity of the magic itself is quite considerable, isn't it? That's why they're so obsessed with forbidden spells."

An artifact of unknown identity called Akasha. From what I heard, it's presumed to be an object designed to contain magic.

The goal of Cantus Magna is its completion. It sent chills down my spine just hearing about it.

"What will happen when Akasha is complete?"

At my question, Antirianus shook his head.

"I don't know. Maybe the leader of Cantus Magna or their high-ranking members know."

What will happen when Akasha is complete? Will it be a threat to the world?

Is it too much of a leap to say that the completion of Akasha will cause a Gate catastrophe? What could possibly happen due to the completion of a powerful artifact with an unknown purpose and identity?

"So, let's assume it's possible, regardless of whether it actually is. If one could access the numerous spells and forbidden knowledge collected in the Akasha by Cantus Magna so far, there might also be a spell to open a dimensional gate to another world. Of course, it's not certain. What is certain, though, is that it contains most of the magic that has ever existed in the world."

They have been collecting forbidden knowledge for a very long time, so if one could access the Akasha, they might be able to learn how to open a dimensional gate.

"Of course, it's been a long time since I was in Cantus Magna, and time has passed, so they must have stored even more magic in the Akasha than when I was there. They might have even completed the Akasha by now."

The possibility is certainly there.

I don't really need a spell to open a dimensional gate to another world. If such a thing truly exists, my goal is to eliminate it.

Cantus Magna collects not just forbidden spells but their own magic spells. Thus, they would not only have access to public spells but would also conduct their own research on magic.

If a spell capable of opening a path to another world truly exists, it would be in the Akasha.

Although I don't really need the spell, if it's in the Akasha, I wonder how the gate incident would unfold.

However, I can clearly sense that I am getting closer, step by step, to the truth about the gate incident, which has remained obscure so far.

I don't know what will happen when the Akasha is completed.

But now, I have to find out.

Because the completion of the Akasha might be the link to the gate incident.

"I want to know how to contact Cantus Magna."

Antirianus.

Suspicious and dangerous-looking, but ultimately, he was the key.

"Isn't that too risky? I don't know what the Akasha is, but they seem extremely

dangerous. It feels like you're trying to meet some really dangerous people for something that might not even be worth it."

Lucinil strongly disapproved, as if it was a terrible idea, but Antirianus shook his head.

"Putting aside whether it's possible or not, wouldn't having the Akasha make the method of reaching another world insignificant? The Akasha itself would be a source of tremendous power."

"Well, I suppose… you're right…"

In the end, the method of reaching another world became unimportant. After all, I was the one who mentioned another world in the context of seeking power. From now on, I can simply say that I want the Akasha in the name of needing power.

"Besides, don't you think it's worth the risk, Lucinil?"

"…What is?"

"Just like how the Akasha might contain the true method of immortality that I couldn't find, it might also hold the key for you to obtain a soul."

At these words, Lucinil stared at Antirianus, seemingly stunned.

Lucinil had mentioned, for reasons unknown, that she desired a soul.

I don't know what magic lies within Akasha, but for now, it is a vessel of possibilities.

Just as what I desire might be there, so too might what Lucinil wants be found in Akasha.

"Antirianus, if you knew all along, why haven't you told us until now?"

At Gallarush's soft question, Antirianus narrowed his eyes.

"If it had been so easy, I wouldn't have given up on immortality and become a vampire. Even now, I'm not particularly eager to confront Cantus Magna."

Antirianus looked at me.

"Of course, in a situation where our intentions are united like this, things might be different."

We might not have to fight them directly if we have to fight.

We could pit Cantus Magna and the Black Order against each other. Of course, no matter how that fight ends, I'll have to secure Akasha somehow.

"I… I… I'll help you."

Lucinil rose as if entranced and spoke to me.

Gaining a soul is Lucinil's desire.

"That's why I didn't mention Akasha, Gallarush."

At Antirianus's words, Gallarush folded his arms.

"You deliberately withheld the information after giving us a clue. I can't believe it."

Antirianus didn't mention Akasha, knowing that Lucinil would latch onto the clue.

However, Antirianus intentionally mentioned that the magic to fulfill wishes might be contained in Akasha.

It was clear that Antirianus also wanted Akasha.

But he didn't want to take the risk, so was he trying to make Lucinil shoulder the risk instead?

Left alone, Lucinil, Eleris, and I would take the risks and sacrifices to approach Cantus Magna on our own.

I'm grateful for the information, but he's ultimately a cunning fellow.

"So, do you know where Cantus Magna is?"

"I know, but of course, they must have changed their location by now. It's been a long time, and they've lost me."

Antirianus doesn't know Cantus Magna's current whereabouts either.

"Therefore, unless there's a tempting prize, finding them is nearly impossible."

Antirianus's words were ultimately no different from what I had told Eleris before.

To find the prize hunters, there must be a prize. It's better to have them come looking for us than for us to search for them.

"Very well. Let's think about that issue later, as there's no hurry yet."

For now, at least.

CHAPTER 342

The day after the council meeting.

Once the conference had dissolved, Eleris and I stood side by side in a remote hallway where the sound of the howling wind echoed from outside.

I leaned against the wall of the hallway, while Eleris stared ahead with a stern expression.

"Is this… the right decision?"

"We can only hope so."

"Your Highness, I have lived a long time, but I have never even heard of an artifact called Akasha. I am afraid… if it exists, its existence is frightening, and if it doesn't, I fear what Antirianus's true intentions might be."

I understood Eleris's fear.

I felt the same fear, after all.

The anxiety that something worse than the Gate incident might occur was palpable.

Wouldn't it be better to face the predetermined Gate incident without doing anything at all?

Getting involved with the mysterious ancient artifact called Akasha could lead to entirely unforeseen consequences.

The future is unknown.

It was obvious, but I had never felt this kind of fear before.

“…I apologize for my thoughtless words."

As I remained silent, Eleris gently grasped my hand.

Her cold body temperature transferred to my hand.

"Your Highness, who should be more afraid than anyone, and yet here I am, expressing my own fear…"

"…"

Had my fear been conveyed without me saying a word?

Eleris seemed to be convinced that I had no sinister intentions to destroy the world.

Things may not go perfectly, but we have to believe in our actions.

If we were going to do nothing, we should have never started anything.

"Everything will be alright."

I spoke, drawing upon the power of the ancient language, but my voice echoed emptily through the hallway.

After the conference reconvened, I asked Antirianus a few more questions.

I inquired about how he first came into contact with Cantus Magna.

In the end, his approach was not very different from mine. Antirianus had dabbled in countless dark arts and forbidden spells in his pursuit of immortality.

"It was originally to summon the hunters of forbidden spells, but if I could obtain immortality in the process, it wouldn't have been a bad outcome."

There were individuals within my knowledge who had committed heinous acts in pursuit of immortality.

That's why my feelings towards Antirianus were rather peculiar.

It was like watching a villain from a hero's tale who had sought immortality and achieved his dream without being defeated by the hero.

I didn't know the extent of the evil deeds committed by the Vampire Lords present here, but Antirianus was truly the embodiment of a wicked sorcerer.

It was as if I were looking at Emperor Qin Shi Huang, who achieved his dream of immortality, a few hundred years later.

That wretched creature…

Can we really leave him be…?

"So the hunters of forbidden spells came, and I asked to join their ranks. In exchange for all the forbidden spells I possessed, I was allowed to become one of them."

"Is Cantus Magna known to easily accept new members?"

"Not exactly. They accepted me because I possessed an extensive collection of forbidden knowledge, and they would have to risk bloodshed to steal it from me. They probably intended to dispose of me soon after."

Antirianus didn't bother making lame excuses about betraying Cantus Magna, as they would have eliminated him eventually anyway.

It seemed that Antirianus wasn't one to care much about rationalizations.

Antirianus and Cantus Magna had temporarily cooperated out of mutual necessity, and in the end, Antirianus had lost out, as he had given them his collection of forbidden knowledge without gaining access to the Akasha.

Of course, Cantus Magna had also suffered losses, as they had failed to eliminate Antirianus and had their secrets exposed.

"Thus, I'm telling you that contacting Cantus Magna could be surprisingly easy if you possess your own unique visions and forbidden knowledge."

The Vampire Council wasn't much different from a secret society. The Black Order knew of the existence of the Vampire Lords but might not be aware of the five vampire families.

Ultimately, the forbidden knowledge and magic exclusive to them would not have been acquired by Cantus Magna yet.

Hence, if the Council's existence became known to Cantus Magna, or if the Vampire Lords revealed themselves, contact would be easy - in the form of them approaching us.

"It seems like a matter that requires careful consideration."

Gallarush's words resonated with me, and I agreed.

"I don't like it."

Luruien seemed reluctant to take on that level of risk.

To be honest, I agreed with that as well.

"Exposing ourselves doesn't seem like a wise approach."

"So, what do you propose?"

At Antirianus's question, I crossed my arms.

"Last time, we made contact with the Black Order. I killed one of their members."

Everyone, except Eleris, was understandably shocked by this statement.

"But that was just a low-level member. It wasn't a big deal. The important thing is that I told them I could give them information about Cantus Magna."

It's highly likely that the Black Order is unaware of the Akasha.

The Black Order wouldn't be completely ignorant about how to contact Cantus Magna. However, since they are rivals, they would want to assess each other before engaging in an all-out war. They would want to fight under the most favorable conditions, whether it be through a surprise attack or otherwise, which is why they need information.

The Black Order's reluctance to risk a direct confrontation with Cantus Magna must have a significant reason.

Can this information provoke a conflict between the Black Order and Cantus Magna? And is it the right thing to do?

"First, let's try negotiating with the Black Order and see what kind of stance they take. We can make a decision later, as there's no need to take unnecessary risks."

Everyone nodded in agreement with my statement.

If we could obtain accurate information from the Black Order, then Cantus Magna might not be relevant at all. However, it was certain that there was something unsettling about Akasha.

Nevertheless, we had succeeded in preparing information on Cantus Magna before the Black Order made contact.

We had gained the cooperation of the Vampire Council, and obtained information about Cantus Magna.

For now, there was nothing left for us to do with the Council until the Black Order matter was resolved.

"For the time being, that concludes my business here."

Their power was not needed at the moment.

I could only hope that such a situation would not arise.

As I gazed up at the seven statues, I suddenly felt a sense of discomfort.

If these were the statues of the lords, then there should have been statues of elves and orcs, those of Gallarush and Luruien.

However, there were no statues with long ears or ones that resembled orcs.

Of course, the statues of Lucinil and Antirianus were intact.

"After being caught in human eyes, they changed them," said a voice from behind me.

Turning around, I saw Luruien standing there.

"They decided not to reveal what kind of place this was to humans, so if there were statues of suspicious-looking orcs or elves, it could be seen as an illegal place," she explained.

Indeed, the statue in the Thursday position had shorter ears but still resembled Luruien.

Of course, the statue that should have represented Gallarush on Friday was in the form of an ordinary person.

Luruien stood in the center of the Pantheon, looking in a certain direction.

"I heard that among all the Vampire Lords, I am the oldest."

“…You heard?"

Why would she talk as if she had heard about herself from someone else? Sensing my confusion, Luruien smiled wryly.

"You see, I erase my memory every 200 years."

"Ah."

Perhaps that was one way to endure immortality.

In that case, Luruien, the oldest existence, would have the least amount of memories of the past.

Had Luruien chosen to erase her memories instead of embracing death?

"I must have wanted to forget, but I had to, so that's probably why…”

Luruien stood in the center of the Pantheon with her arms folded, looking in some direction.

"I'm so curious about what I knew before I erased my memory."

Her eyes had a faint, nostalgic feeling.

"Why the elves were exterminated for some reason."

"What happened to Sunday and Monday? What were they in the first place?"

"I must have known everything."

"Why did I have to erase those memories?"

"Or, did I actually erase my memories?"

Luruien looked at me.

It wasn't just curiosity, but a longing that was almost like desire.

She had erased her own memories, but she couldn't understand why she had to do so, and it seemed as if Luruien longed for the lost memories.

She must have known everything. But she was curious about the reason why she had to erase it.

Luruien stood still, watching the statue of Sunday and Monday.

Apart from Antirianus, the Vampire Lords were all complicated beings, beyond good and evil.

"Do you have a wish like Wednesday's Lord?"

"Like Lucinil?"

Did Luruien have something like that, as Lucinil had wanted a soul?

"Perhaps… regaining my true memories. All the memories I've forgotten so far."

Luruien said that and shook her head.

"But if I find them all, I'll surely go mad."

She wanted to regain her memories, but she didn't have the confidence to bear them.

"That's right. I don't particularly have a wish, but I don't want to face death. I'm just postponing it like this. I live with only very important memories left, including the fact that I'm a Vampire Lord and that I lead the Thursday Clan."

Excluding memories of magic, power, and knowledge, she had erased all useless memories and continued to accumulate time.

"Living… on."

As if compressing himself. Luruien seemed to ponder her last words, then tilted her head. Perhaps she thought the word "living" didn't suit the undead.

"Rather, it seems more accurate to say that I'm slowly dying."

Postponing death indefinitely into the future and slowly dying.

When they can no longer bear the immortal time, they choose death.

So, Luruien said, it's not living, but slowly dying.

It seemed the same as living, but what's the difference?

Living and slowly dying.

The results were the same, but the nuances were painfully different.

"After all your plans are finished and you truly rebuild Darkland, what do you plan to do?"

Luruien asked me that.

A profound emptiness emanated from this ancient being. She was living, but the awareness of living a meaningless life without reason could be felt.

If I become the Demon King, then what comes next, and next, and after that?

Is that what you're asking?

Unfortunately, I have no intention of truly becoming the Demon King. Thus, such a question is meaningless.

I've never thought about it.

"I'll do something."

"…?"

"That's right. I'll do something. I won't do nothing at all."

Even if it came to that, I wouldn't do nothing, so that's all I could say.

At my words, Luruien burst into laughter.

"Ha ha… Ha ha! I see. Yes. Something… I'll do something."

I didn't know what was so funny about my words, but Luruien's ears perked up as she laughed.

"That's good. Perhaps it's better to think that way."

I couldn't tell what kind of resonance my casual response had with Luruien.

However, Luruien said that it had been a long time since she laughed like that, and then she disappeared down the hallway in silence.

Emptiness is not for those who have given up on thinking.

It is because one thinks too deeply and then thinks again that they fall into emptiness.

Having realized that, Luruien's footsteps seemed quite light.

The next day.

While I had no immediate business with the other Vampire Lords, they agreed to cooperate.

Although Akasha itself is a great source of power, they said they would investigate how to open the dimensional gate to the other world I had mentioned.

"It's a subject I've never considered before. It piques my interest."

It was Antirianus' words.

Regardless of whether it was possible to collapse the empire through cooperation

with the other world, it seemed that the idea of exploring the existence of the other world appealed to him.

They were great people with nothing but time on their hands. Being mages as well, it seemed their interest was simply piqued.

"If the Demon King needs our help, the Council will reconvene."

Those were Luruien's words.

Normally, the Council would not be convened unless there was a special reason. However, since the Vampire Council had decided to establish a connection with me, they seemed committed to fulfilling their responsibilities as allies.

Although they couldn't provide much help, they all cooperated with me for their own reasons.

I quietly watched as they began to leave Epiaux fortress one by one through teleportation.

Eleris had left the imperial capital for now. There would be no reason for her to return to the capital until she found a new hiding place or disguise.

Thus, it seemed she would remain in the Council as a liaison for the time being.

I thought we could meet anytime through teleportation, but as the distance grew vast, it felt somewhat sad.

It was nice to have her within reach, after all.

In the grand hall of Epiaux fortress, Eleris bowed her head to me.

"Please take care, Your Highness."

"?"

What is she talking about?

"I should accompany you, shouldn't I? Not send you off alone?"

"Ah."

Eleris tilted her head as I said that.

"It seems Lucinil hasn't told you yet."

I wondered what she was talking about, and before I knew it, Lucinil was standing beside me.

"Archdemon, you're coming with me."

“…Why?"

"I have to stay here for a while, so if you need magic, Lucinil will help you."

Ah.

I see.

Lucinil has no clan under her control and is alone. So she is more free than the other Vampire Lords.

Moreover, there was Lydia's supervision and due to the mission as a Council liaison, Eleris had decided to stay here for a while.

So, for now, I won't have Eleris's support.

That meant that from now on, if I needed to go somewhere using teleportation or needed powerful magic, Lucinil would be there to help.

"Lucinil is much more versatile than I am, so she can serve you better."

What kind of debt did the Lord of Wednesday owe for her to help me like this? Even Eleris seemed to trust Lucinil quite a bit, at least more than the other Vampire Lords.

"Serve, Eleris? That makes it sound like I'm inferior to this guy."

"Ah, sorry Lucinil. Let's correct that to protect."

"Tsk."

"Protect, huh? That makes it sound like I need a nanny or something."

“…Didn't you?"

"Tsk."

I couldn't help but admit it.

While not actually a nanny, having an archmage by my side was quite convenient. In place of Eleris, the archmage who would be busy with other duties for a while, I had another archmage at my side.

Although Lucinil appeared to be a foolish child on the outside, she was actually a Homunculus Vampire just pretending to be a young child.

"Get ready. We'll be leaving soon."

Lucinil signaled me as she finished casting.

"Please take care, Your Highness."

Eleris looked at me with a worried gaze.

"You too, be careful."

Somehow.

It felt strange and bizarre, like saying goodbye to my parents!

Soon, Lucinil activated the Mass Teleport.

CHAPTER 343

-Flash!

With a burst of light, Lucinil and I returned to the outskirts of the Imperial City.

Before I knew it, Lucinil had transformed from a vampire with snake-like eyes to a young girl with silver hair and blue eyes.

I, too, had assumed my Reinhardt form instead of being Valier.

"Hmm, so this is your disguise?"

"Yes."

Lucinil looked me up and down in my Reinhardt form and crossed her arms.

"You do look quite like your true self."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind."

There was no one around us.

"It's been a while since I've been to the Imperial City."

Lucinil gazed at the sprawling landscape of the city in the distance.

"Do we have a place to stay?"

"Hmm… We should find a man called Count Argon Ponteus. He said he'd help us out somehow."

It seemed that Lucinil was entrusted to Sarkegaar. Sarkegaar was a competent man, so he believed he would take care of things.

Lost in thought, Lucinil kept her arms crossed.

"You mentioned you'd also be in contact with the Black Order, right?"

“…Yes."

"I don't know how you've been managing up until now, but things are about to get really dangerous. So try to stay within a range where I can help you."

As I became more deeply involved with the Holy Knights and the Black Order, I was bound to face dangerous situations more frequently. It seemed that Lucinil intended to provide close protection.

She was right.

I had to admit Lucinil had a point.

“…I need to go to the temple?"

“…The temple?"

I knew this wasn't the right time to mention it.

Compared to our previous conversations, this was something that shouldn't have been said.

But I really need to go to school! It's winter break now, but even the Vampire Council had aligned their schedule with the break!

The temple is my priority!

Strictly speaking, that place is the most important! In many ways!

"Oh, you… you were infiltrating there, right?"

Lucinil tilted her head, seemingly having heard something from Eleris.

Infiltrating… is that right?

Isn't it?

"Forget it. Now's not the time for that, is it?"

Lucinil stated the obvious as if I had lost my mind wanting to play in water during a typhoon.

It was a bit disconcerting to be lectured by someone who appeared to be a child, even if she wasn't really one.

"No, I must be at the temple. I have so many things tied up there…"

"…Are you serious?"

"Yes."

Lucinil looked at me, then bit her lower lip with her index finger.

It felt as if she was desperately holding back a torrent of curses.

"No, there are reasons for this!"

Honestly, my staying at the temple wasn't an absurd idea.

I had explained to her how important it was to build relationships with influential people at the temple under the pretext of rebuilding the Demon Realm. Moreover, my classmates would become the successors of the empire, and I had told her about the influence I held over them.

"…Now that I hear it, you're right."

Lucinil nodded as if it made sense when I mentioned that I had infiltrated the temple to forge connections with the empire's influential figures.

"It's quite risky, though… I won't interfere that much."

Lucinil crossed his arms and looked at me.

"If you die absurdly, it won't hurt me. Just be careful for Eleris's sake."

It seemed that Lucinil had no intention of meddling with me more than necessary.

If she had dug a little deeper, she might have realized that I was living a temple life for a slightly different purpose.

It would have been complicated to explain if that were the case, but fortunately, it wasn't.

"For now, I'll follow Eleris's advice and seek out Count Argon Ponteus."

That meant I could contact him through the Rotary Club, and when Lucinil was needed, I could send a messenger to Sarkegaar. Alternatively, when Sarkegaar visited regularly, I could ask him to call for Lucinil.

I parted ways with Lucinil for now.

Another archmage. Lucinil, the Lord of Wednesday.

Eleris had said that Lucinil was more versatile than herself, but I still couldn't understand what that meant.

After Lucinil entered the Imperial Road, I also began my journey along it.

Harriet would be researching dimensional magic through the Imperial Palace's magical archives. However, it would be difficult to expect significant results in just a few days.

The progress came from my side.

For just a few days on the Imperial Road, the results were quite significant.

"Your Majesty, it seems that our investigation has not found any traceable evidence."

"I see."

Bertus was reading the written reports in his office at the Winter Palace.

The royal and Holy Knights' investigations into the recent death of Riverrier Lanze were now over. The funeral had already taken place, but they were still investigating the demons who had attacked them.

It was certain that non-human beings had attacked.

Though most of the bodies had been blown up and carbonized, there were some torn apart corpses.

It appeared they had died while fleeing after the defeat.

Bertus was looking at the magically recorded photos of the battle scene.

There were no pictures, but there were multiple accounts of witnesses seeing something in the shape of a demon flying in the night sky.

'Why did they do that…?'

Bertus became lost in thought.

There were more than enough reasons for the demons to attack the Holy Knights.

Moreover, the demons that attacked this time were believed to be the same ones that had attacked the Holy Knights before.

Previously, a powerful mage, a Lycan, and a dragon had appeared. Of course, it was not believed to be a real dragon, but they still didn't know what kind of demon it was.

During the last attack, they had activated a warp gate, leading the demon prisoners in their escape.

However, there were no casualties at that time.

With this attack, it became clear.

During the previous attack, they didn't fight the Holy Knights because they couldn't, but because they chose not to.

Soon, it was evident that the demons at that time had no intention of killing.

However, this attack was overflowing with malice. Not only were all the Holy Knights killed, but also Riverrier Lanze.

At that time, escaping as a prisoner had been their priority, so they didn't fight.

Bertus felt that his thoughts were becoming increasingly tangled.

It wasn't just suspicious, there were too many strange things.

It was understandable that large-scale destruction magic had been used, but there were multiple witness accounts of something in the shape of a demon wandering the night sky.

'Why?'

It seemed as if they were advertising that this was an attack by the demon race.

It would have been better to disguise it as a human conflict, but the demon flew through the night sky, flaunting its presence.

Did the demons really know about the nameless religious order?

Did they not know anything about the current state of the continent?

If they did, the demons should have disguised this as a human conflict rather than flaunting their presence.

Although there are actual witness accounts of demons, some people suspect that the royal family or the pro-imperialist faction assassinated the nameless religious order and its leader, Riverrier Lanze, by disguising it as the work of demons.

If there had been no witness accounts of demons, this incident would have been a powerful event that would have triggered an explosion of resentment from the Holy Knights and the five major religions.

Knowing that, they shouldn't have attacked in such a way.

If one were in the position of leading the remnants of the demon realm, they would never have done it this way.

'It can't be that they're stupid.'

This was the most foolish action the demons could have taken.

This would only help the empire.

One must not make the mistake of thinking that the remnants could be so foolish. It may have been emotional, but it just so happened that everything fell into place for the empire.

'Did they really intend to help the empire? Why?'

There was no reason to do so, but it seemed that the demons attacked the nameless religious order to help the empire and intentionally revealed their presence.

Why did they have to do that?

Why were the demons doing this, risking themselves to do something that would only benefit the empire?

Seeing this as the remnants' mistake was overly optimistic.

The demons had helped the empire.

Although the situation was such, Bertus was increasingly confused because he couldn't understand why they had to do it.

He couldn't comprehend their intentions at all.

While Bertus was furrowing his brow and trying to somehow unfold his thoughts alone,

"Your Highness… About the matter you ordered last time…"

The subordinate who was reporting cautiously intruded on the prince's concerns.

Bertus, who was in the midst of deep thought, furrowed his brow even more.

"Before? What are you talking about?"

"Well… You asked us to investigate the silver-haired girl…"

"Ah… That."

Due to the enormous incident, Bertus had completely forgotten about that matter.

As the memory of the great rudeness he had committed, spewing tea on her face, came back to life, Bertus's face turned slightly red.

"Um, yes. Did you find out anything?"

The girl with silver hair of unknown origin.

She vaguely resembled Reinhardt, so it was merely a fleeting thought that they might be siblings separated in childhood.

There was a time when he had encountered a silver-haired girl who bore a striking resemblance to Reinhardt, a classmate, and he wondered if she might be a family member.

Having forgotten about the incident, Bertus felt a renewed sense of nostalgia.

Technically, this is stalking.

The empire belongs to the emperor, and the first prince is one of the most powerful contenders for the imperial throne.

So, if the prince were to openly stalk someone, it would cause a tremendous uproar.

"First, I looked into the personal registration information of the imperial citizens…"

"And?"

If the first prince decided to, he could turn the entire empire, or at least the imperial capital, upside down.

"There was no personal information matching the criteria you mentioned."

"You said the silver hair could be dyed… I thought there would be none."

It's not like they had a detailed montage, so it would be difficult for Bertus to hope for a match with the identity information he remembered.

Silver hair, golden eyes, and a beautiful face.

The information was sparse.

So, even if the person were an imperial citizen, it would have been difficult to find someone who fit the criteria.

"So, for now, I looked into Reinhardt, who you said was your classmate. I tried to start by finding his personal registration information…"

"Um, that would have been the most likely possibility."

Reinhardt came from the streets, but he had personal information.

If they started with his place of origin and worked their way up, they should have been able to find out. However, his subordinate scratched his head as if he were having trouble.

"But Reinhardt's initial personal registration was made at the beginning of last year. I couldn't find any information prior to that, no matter how hard I looked."

"…Huh?"

At those words, Bertus cocked his head.

"Such cases are not uncommon. Some people from lowly origins live without registering their identities… As you said, some lifelong street beggars have no personal information at all. You mentioned that Reinhardt came from the streets, so…"

Reinhardt's personal information was registered for the first time last year. This means that before then, he had been living as a person of unknown identity.

It's not unusual.

Certainly, it's not that strange.

However, Bertus once suspected that Reinhardt might be a successor raised by a criminal organization.

Reinhardt denied it, and although Bertus didn't believe his words, he didn't conduct any further investigation.

His subordinate said that tracking down Reinhardt's birthplace was virtually impossible since he had lived as a person of unknown identity for quite some time.

As time had passed, Bertus now understood that some of the misunderstandings he had about Reinhardt were not true.

The Rotary Club to which Reinhardt belonged was merely an organization of beggars.

Reinhardt was just a beggar. He was sent from the Rotary Club to the temple.

His personal registration was made at the beginning of last year.

No sooner had he registered his identity than he entered the temple and enrolled in the Royal Class.

So, it must have meant that he had obtained an identity to enter the temple.

Bertus thought that Reinhardt might lack refinement, but he did have discernment.

He knew quite a bit for someone who came from the streets, but it was possible to develop discernment from picking up bits and pieces at the club since childhood.

However, Bertus suddenly became curious.

Was Reinhardt really from the royal family?

Where was he born and how did he grow up?

"Just ask him directly, I suppose."

Where he came from.

If he had any siblings.

He could ask when he had time to stop by the temple.

Putting Reinhardt's matter aside for now, Bertus began to ponder the demon group once again.

His head still felt like it was going to explode.

Several days had passed since returning from the Vampire Council.

Nothing had changed significantly. The Magic Research Society was, of course, busy, and so was Harriet.

So, I spent my days busily training with Olivia and waiting for Ellen to return, as usual.

But then.

"Where are you from?"

When Bertus, who had returned from the palace, suddenly asked that out of the blue, it felt as if my heart had sunk.

"Um… the royal family."

"Which part of the royal family?"

What is it?

Has something been discovered?

My heart pounded like crazy.

But I desperately maintained a calm facade through self-suggestion.

"Well, I'm not exactly sure. I was abandoned when I was very young. How would a street rat like me remember something like that?"

“…I see."

I had thought about how he had grown up all this time.

But if Bertus had discovered something and knew my true identity, I would have to leave the royal family.

But so suddenly?

If he knew the truth, he wouldn't be so calm asking me, would he?

It was just a casual attitude asking something trivial. Bertus crossed his arms and looked at me as if contemplating something.

"Why are you asking that all of a sudden?"

In the end, I asked. Bertus seemed to hesitate for a moment before letting out a deep sigh.

“…It's a bit awkward to say this, but… well, alright."

Bertus placed his hand on my shoulder and spoke quietly.

"Do you have any siblings?"

Ah.

Could it be?

Was it that?

"No, not at all. At least, not in my memory… I think…”

"I saw a girl who looked very similar to you during the last festival. So, I thought she might be your sibling and tried to find her, but it's hard to find someone you only know by face."

"Oh, I see…”

I feel dizzy.

I feel like I'm going to vomit.

"So, if I knew where you're from, I could look for her, so I checked your identity, but your first identity registration was last year?"

At those words, goosebumps ran all over my body.

I couldn't believe that my encounter with Bertus while disguised as a woman had led to an investigation into my background.

Bertus was still unaware of anything, and he didn't seem suspicious of the fact that I had registered my identity for the first time last year, without any prior records.

Dangerous.

It would be truly dangerous if he dug any deeper.

"So… it's a bit awkward to say this, but your parents abandoned you, and then… If you had a sibling born after that, you might not even know about them, right? So, I don't want to do it if you don't want me to, but if you want, I'm thinking of looking into it personally…"

I can't let that happen.

He might find out.

I have to stop him.

What began as a favor might lead him to discover my true identity.

This is no joke; my life is genuinely at risk.

There's no other choice.

Almost as a reflex.

"That's me."

I had no choice but to tell the truth.

"…Huh? What?"

Bertus seemed unable to comprehend what he had just heard.

"It's me, I said."

I was curious about the expression I must have had on my face.

"What…? Huh? What did you say?"

Bertus started to doubt his own ears.

I had escaped death, but…

I felt like dying.

CHAPTER 344

The terrace where I used to exchange stories with Bertus from time to time.

There, Bertus trembled as he poured tea, and likewise, his hands shook so much that the tea overflowed as he drank it.

I hung my head, unable to even look at Bertus.

I wanted to die.

And Bertus must have wanted to kill me.

"Why… did you do that?"

Bertus asked in a low voice.

“…Because of money."

“…Money? What does that have to do with cross-dressing?"

"Well, there was a… a cross-dressing contest…”

"A cross-dressing contest? You mean at the festival?"

“…Yes."

"Hasn't your financial situation improved lately?"

"It's not like having it is a bad thing…”

In a subdued voice, with my head down, I explained why I had cross-dressed.

This must be the punishment that's befallen me, right?

Isn't this the climax?

It's hard to imagine a more difficult situation in my life, right? Having been punished enough, I can believe that only happiness awaits me from now on, right?

Bertus barely took a sip of his tea and then put the teacup down with a shaking hand.

"What, exactly… what… is this?"

Bertus seemed unable to grasp what to say.

It was Bertus with his mask off, but not in the usual sense—stripped away in a different way.

"Ugh. This… what… ah…"

"…"

It seemed that Bertus' memory of seeing me in my cross-dressed state came flooding back.

Me, doing swordplay with the knights.

Me, trembling with my hands.

Me, spouting nonsense about alcohol addiction.

All those moments.

All those images.

It was all me.

"…"

"…"

In the midst of mixed feelings of guilt and self-loathing,

"Damn it… F*ck."

I ended up silently listening to Bertus' barely audible swearing as if I were a sinner.

“…I'm sorry."

"What the hell are you sorry for, you bastard! When you say you're sorry! What, uh! It's not like! Uh! No! It's not like that! I just! Uh! You, my brother! Uh! Just, just out of good intentions! Uh! This, this crazy!"

"Who, who said what?!"

Bertus finally exploded.

And I just ended up getting cursed at even more for my needless apology.

Bertus' gaze towards me had changed.

To that of a madman who would do anything for money.

Fortunately, Bertus didn't seem to hold a grudge against me or plan to spread any rumors.

Feeling as if his soul was being polluted just by mentioning or thinking about the incident, Bertus staggered into his room with a hollow expression.

I had considered the possibility that my participation in the cross-dressing contest might be exposed somehow, but I never imagined that I would end up confessing it myself.

"…”

It felt like hell, but my heart sank even more.

The incident where I coincidentally ran into Bertus had taken a strange turn and was leading to an investigation behind my back.

When people begin to dig into my background, my hometown, and the intricate details of my past, there's bound to be holes in the excuses I've prepared, no matter how well thought out they may be.

Even if I handle it expertly, the fact that I appeared out of nowhere last year cannot

be changed. And that is not difficult to discern once someone starts investigating properly.

It was a situation where Bertus could have discovered my true identity from an unexpected angle.

Fortunately, confessing my involvement in the cross-dressing contest threw Bertus off psychologically. With his pride wounded, he wouldn't delve further into the issue.

The cross-dressing contest mission…

As impressive as the rewards were, it could have easily exposed me from an unforeseen corner.

I had knowingly undertaken the risky Riverrier Lanze affair.

Yet, the genuinely dangerous situation was derived from the cross-dressing contest.

If Bertus had done more digging without directly asking me, the situation could have turned truly perilous.

But.

Why, in such a life-threatening situation, was the feeling of embarrassment and wanting to die even stronger?

For a while, I could do nothing but sit there, unable to move.

There had been an incident that left both Bertus and me mentally shattered, but Bertus, being as busy as he was, rarely appeared in the Royal Class dormitory.

I too was losing track of the numerous events that had been set in motion.

Ellen still hadn't returned. In the end, I had to carry on with my own routine.

Worry and anxiety couldn't resolve anything.

I even had a fencing match with Olivia, but lately, my focus had been on the

utilization of magical power itself.

Ugh.

Alone in the practice arena.

[Your Magic Power level has reached 20 (A-).]

[Special conditions have been achieved.]

['Magic Control' and 'Magic Sensitivity' talents evolve.]

[You have acquired the 'Talent - Magic Mastery.']

Through the practice arena's mirror, I could see my body enveloped by refined magic power.

Finally, I succeeded in attaining Magic Mastery, one of Ellen's talents.

I had nearly exposed my true identity because of the cross-dressing contest and suffered a great embarrassment.

But it had brought me very close to Magic Mastery.

When I first acquired the Magic Sensitivity and Control talents, I honestly couldn't grasp their essence. However, as a result, I was able to obtain Magic Body Strengthening, and it was clear that the assistance of those two talents was significant.

Now, I could use Magic Body Strengthening without self-suggestion, and I had even gained the higher-level talent of Magic Mastery.

My Magic Rank was now A-, which was quite high.

Rumble!

As I felt the surge of magical power throughout my body, I became capable of a different kind of Magic Body Strengthening.

The manipulation of magical power had become more sophisticated and detailed,

and its output had also increased.

Obtaining Magic Mastery wasn't the end.

As I grew more accustomed to it, the Magic Mastery talent would make me even stronger.

It wouldn't be right to say I'm on the same starting line as Ellen. That guy is still better than me and will become stronger at a faster pace than me.

Thanks to numerous cheats, I can now walk a little faster.

But I shouldn't be satisfied with just this level.

The moment I become complacent is the end. I still have a long way to go.

Nevertheless, with just one talent called magic mastery, my understanding and utilization of Magic Body Strengthening have increased significantly.

I'm getting stronger abnormally fast.

Under the name of the Royal Class, such abnormal aspects are accepted as normal, but I wonder how long this can last.

After finishing my training in the practice arena, I returned to the dormitory, showered, and changed my clothes.

-Chirp!

-Tap tap!

A sparrow could be seen tapping on my window with its beak.

-Creak

As I opened the window, the sparrow flew into the room, and as soon as it hit the curtain, it took the form of a human.

"I am here to serve you."

"Ah."

It was Sarkegaar, who always took the form of a maid when entering the dormitory.

I was sitting in a chair, and Sarkegaar stood still in the center of the room with her hands clasped.

"The Lord of Wednesday has come to find me."

"I thought so. How is it?"

"I was a bit flustered since I hadn't received any information, but I listened to the situation and took care of it for now."

Considering Lucinil's age, the expression 'taking care of it' seemed a bit off. In reality, it felt more like 'looking after a child.'

"It wasn't exposed to the outside, right?"

"Yes, she came secretly late at night by herself."

Sarkegaar was also in a stealth situation. So, Lucinil must have been careful not to expose herself to the outside.

I briefly explained to Sarkegaar what happened at the Vampire Council.

"It's a greater achievement than you could have imagined."

"Yeah, honestly, I didn't think it would turn out like this."

Sarkegaar seemed satisfied with the outcome, which turned out much better than expected.

"But you must be careful. I don't know much about the Vampire Lords, but from what I've heard, Antirianus seems dangerous."

"True. However, I can't choose who I should join hands with."

In this situation, it's not the time to be picky about allies. If a suspicious person is willing to side with me, I have to join hands with them.

"And Cantus Magna and Akasha… I think they are excessively dangerous."

"That's true. But there's a high possibility that what I want is there. It's bound to be a very powerful force in itself."

"It would be ideal to provoke a conflict between the Black Order and Cantus Magna and take advantage of the chaos. However, it's troubling that we don't know what Akasha is."

Is it really right to provoke Cantus Magna without knowing what Akasha is?

Sarkegaar seemed to think that my desire for power was enough for me to covet Akasha, regardless of whether it was possible or not.

"Things are starting to fall into place, Your Highness."

Sarkegaar showed a sinister smile. I had gained the power of the Vampire Council, and the Lord of Wednesday had joined the ranks to cooperate.

From the remnants of the demons, something worthy of being called a force was now being completed, and Sarkegaar was genuinely delighted.

However.

Please, do not smile so charmingly with that face.

It feels like cognitive dissonance when you smile like that with a face that appears so innocent!

Of course, the mission was not over yet.

"How is the contact with the revolutionary forces going?"

"We're cautiously looking into it, as acting hastily may cause mistakes. We've been able to find out about a list of those who have definitely been involved, although not the entire upper echelons."

Sarkegaar showed a list of several people.

Names, including Oscar de Gradias, were listed.

Most were bureaucrats of commoner origin, and there were even some nobles among them.

"Especially, there are many illegitimate children abandoned by noble families."

"I see."

Illegitimate children of noble families often enter the temple under hidden identities. They could have enrolled in the Orbis Class as well.

Children who have noble blood but were abandoned.

Their resentment could be transformed into a desire for revolution. Most of the names would have been thoroughly verified by Sarkegaar, so the participants were certain.

However, in the end, the small fry were not necessary.

What I needed were the core factors. Making contact with them and establishing a cooperation structure with the demonic forces was my task.

And from the list Sarkegaar provided, I found a name I recognized, if not particularly familiar.

I pointed to the name.

"This gentleman, while not part of the upper echelons, is certainly an important figure."

"Indeed."

Owen de Gatmora.

The name of the merchant guild master was written there.

The merchant guild master had provided a substantial amount of research funding

to the magic research club. He paid me as a bribe for collusion with the royal family.

There had been no particular requests or connections with the merchant guild since then, but they were making money now. All the goods for the magic train shop business were provided by the merchant guild. And I had no particular issues with them.

Sarkegaar's investigation confirmed that the merchant guild master was involved in the revolutionary forces.

"So, the one who poured money into me for collusion with the royal family is secretly supporting the revolutionary forces…"

I could not tell whether he simply wanted money or if he genuinely dreamed of revolution.

Whether this guy was part of the upper echelons or not, he was important because he could lead to the upper echelons.

"Alright. Make contact with Owen de Gatmora, and if necessary, approach him in the name of Darkland. Also, keep in mind that I might meet with him personally depending on the situation. Consider that as well."

Sarkegaar wore a cautious expression.

"Your Highness, please bear in mind that they may refuse to cooperate with us out of fear for the name of the Demon Realm."

"Hmm, that wouldn't be ideal."

Sarkegaar's words carried a hint of skepticism about the potentially negative outlook.

"Once they've been caught by us, they should know that terrible things will happen the moment we expose them to the Empire. From the moment their tracks are found, they have no choice but to join us or face death."

The revolutionary forces must choose. They have no choice but to realize that if they don't join us, we can bring them down in other ways. We don't even have to do it ourselves.

All we need to do is hand over the secured list to the Empire.

Though they could deny it.

The Empire is extremely sensitive due to the power struggle with the Holy Knights. If they perceive the revolutionary forces as an additional threat, they will do everything in their power to annihilate them.

So, they won't be able to ignore us.

"I have infiltrated them successfully, Your Highness."

Sarkegaar is entrusted with the task of making contact with the revolutionary forces.

"If necessary, seek Lucinil's help. You're more likely to require magic in your situation than I am."

"Understood, Your Highness."

Sarkegaar's tasks are supported by Lucinil, who will be with him for the time being.

Things are progressing step by step.

As tasks unfold one by one under the name of Valier,

I will gradually distance myself from the identity of Reinhardt.

I quietly watched the figure of Sarkegaar, flying away like a sparrow.

CHAPTER 345

The day I was caught in women's clothing, I issued important directives about forming an alliance with the anti-imperial forces.

Sometimes I wondered what kind of person I was becoming.

The difference between what I should do as Reinhardt and what I should do as Valiere seemed to be getting too great.

In the meantime, I also awakened a superior talent called magic mastery.

And now, I felt a sense of crisis that the butterfly effect of my actions so far could overwhelm me at any moment.

After experiencing the unlikely situation of my participation in the cross-dressing contest leading to Berthus investigating me, I felt like I was walking on thin ice.

And when would Ellen return?

That night.

My body felt heavy as if it weighed a thousand pounds due to the long training session, but I couldn't sleep properly, perhaps because I had too many things on my mind.

After tossing and turning for a few hours and barely falling asleep, how much time had passed?

Gulp

Rein… Reinhardt…

"Uh, uh-ah!"

I woke up with a start at the desperate touch gripping my hand.

As I sat up in bed, I saw Charlotte, who was almost lying down, clutching my arm tightly.

"Cha… Charlotte?"

"Rein… Reinhardt…"

Half of Charlotte's face was covered in darkness, and she looked at me with tears in her eyes.

Fear and shock cleared my mind faster than surprise.

I thought it was over.

Was it not completely finished yet?

"Me, please… please do something… please…"

"Uh, um. Okay. I got it."

Not knowing what to do, I instinctively embraced the shivering Charlotte.

"It's okay. It's… it's all okay…"

"Uh, uh-huh…"

Tears streaming down her face, Charlotte trembled in my arms.

I thought it was over, but was it not?

With my sleepy mind focused, I desperately whispered as if reciting a prayer.

"It'll be alright."

Charlotte's power hadn't disappeared.

"Nothing will happen."

Would Charlotte have to live in this pain forever if her power didn't disappear?

I whispered reassurances, stroking Charlotte's back over and over.

The curse.

Whether it was the curse's power or not, Charlotte's trembling subsided, and the darkness that seemed to engulf her body gradually receded.

Was this really a reaction to the curse?

Both Charlotte and Saviolin Turner understood it that way.

But I couldn't tell whether it was reacting to my demonic domination, the curse, or something else entirely.

However.

"Huuk… huk… ugh…"

It seemed certain that I was the only one who could improve Charlotte's condition.

As her trembling subsided and she returned to her usual appearance, I finally took in the sight of her.

She was in a camisole and barefoot.

Her body was soaked in cold sweat, making it awkward to look at.

Charlotte couldn't bring herself to leave my embrace.

"…"

"…"

It seemed that as her condition improved, she couldn't help but think about what she had become and tremble.

I carefully pulled the blanket down and covered it over Charlotte's shoulders.

"Are you feeling a bit better?"

"Uh, uh-huh…”

In the darkness, Charlotte nodded, wrapping the blanket I had draped over her like a cloak. I gently helped her up from the floor where she was sitting and carefully seated her on the bed.

My door was closed. Upon checking the lock, I found it was locked.

How did she get in?

"What happened?"

“…I didn't lose consciousness this time. But suddenly, this happened."

Before, her body would be taken over while she was unconscious or asleep.

But this time, the shadow began to invade her body while she was still awake.

"I had to come to you, but if I went into the corridor… I didn't know who might see me…”

Charlotte trembled, seemingly afraid of what she had done.

Previously, she had demonstrated the ability to be completely consumed by shadows.

It seemed that she had used the power to move through shadows or darkness to travel directly from her room to mine.

"I don't want this… I don't want to be able to do this…”

Although Charlotte was able to come to me undetected by anyone due to this power, the very fact that it was possible seemed terribly frightening to her.

Her fear seemed to prevent her from making sound judgments.

"Stay with me… Stay with me, Reinhardt…”

"Alright. I'll stay with you."

As Charlotte clung to my waist, she looked up at me in the darkness.

Her large, terrified eyes were filled with tears.

It seemed dangerous.

Charlotte, in her unstable state, seemed to be on the verge of collapsing once more, now that she thought she was safe again.

"Stay with me… Keep staying…”

As Charlotte's lips began to part slightly.

"It's okay."

I pulled Charlotte's head towards my chest.

"You don't need to be so scared, it's alright."

"…”

I couldn't help it, as it seemed something irreversible was about to happen.

"Nothing will happen. I'm sure of it."

Charlotte remained still, nestled in my arms, for a very long time.

When her fear subsided, Charlotte fell asleep as if she had fainted.

As I had done at the Spring Palace before, I kept watch beside Charlotte's bed.

How long had it been since Charlotte had fallen asleep?

-Knock, knock, knock!

The sudden, urgent knocking on the door made my body tense, but only for a moment.

"Reinhardt, it's me."

As I heard the voice coming from beyond the door, my tension eased.

It was Saviolin Turner.

I carefully got up and opened the door, revealing a pale-faced Saviolin Turner.

-Gasp

"Reinhardt, by any chance, Her Highness is here… I see."

Upon seeing Charlotte lying in bed through the crack in the door, she breathed a sigh of relief.

She straightened her posture and entered my room, placing her hand gently on the forehead of the sleeping Charlotte.

"I came to check on her when she suddenly disappeared…"

Saviolin Turner had been at the temple to guard Charlotte.

Although they didn't share a bedroom, Turner would periodically check on Charlotte to ensure she was sleeping well.

But when Charlotte suddenly vanished, she came to find me, worried. Charlotte was in a deep slumber.

"It seems her consciousness hasn't been consumed this time. But her power was suddenly unleashed, and she seems to have traveled through the shadows to my room."

"Is that so…"

Her consciousness wasn't consumed, but her power was acting on its own.

It was clear to both Turner and me that Charlotte's condition hadn't completely improved.

Turner looked down at the sleeping Charlotte with a troubled expression.

"It's like a stroke of luck that you can somehow calm her down…"

She seemed to think that my very existence was a great fortune for Charlotte.

"But to suppress her power with this imperfect method… It's nothing more than a stopgap."

How long I can keep Charlotte stable is uncertain.

Turner seemed to think that we needed to find a more fundamental solution, and I agreed.

But where could such a thing be found?

Searching for a seal master is a thing of the past.

In the end, my thoughts were drawn to that side.

Akasha.

Though I hated treating it as an omnipotent tool capable of fulfilling anything, my thoughts couldn't help but be drawn to it now.

Would there be a way to seal Charlotte's power there?

Turner gently wiped the cold sweat from Charlotte's forehead with a handkerchief and spoke softly.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes."

"…It's clear that her power is related to the Demon King. You know that, right?"

"…Yes."

I knew that better than anyone else.

"Is it a leap to think that there might be clues to resolving her situation in the Demon King's castle?"

In Turner's gloomy tone, there was a mixture of her sorrow at being unable to help the suffering princess.

But the Demon King's castle.

Though not a place I yearn for, it was where everything started.

I still don't know what's there.

“…I'm not sure. Didn't we already bring back everything of value from the Demon King's castle?"

"That's true. But the Demon King's castle has been a very important place throughout Darkland's history, which is as long as that of humanity. We may not have uncovered everything yet."

There were still things in the Demon King's castle that hadn't been uncovered. So, treasures and numerous items were brought out, but there still might be hidden things, and they were still being investigated.

Hearing her words, it occurred to me that the fall of the Demon King's castle and fully understanding it were different matters.

I am merely suppressing Charlotte's power with a transcendent force called a spellbinding. I am not even sure if it is truly the power of spellbinding.

I agree with her that a more fundamental solution is needed.

Could there be a clue on the Demon King's castle?

"Are you planning to go to the Demon King's castle?"

“…There is no need for me to go personally, as numerous personnel have already been deployed for the search."

There is no need for her to go directly. She is not lacking in people she can entrust with this task.

"Her Majesty suggested… that she might want to visit the Demon King's castle herself. It's certainly dangerous. We have both opposed it because of the danger.

Both I and His Majesty."

She looks at me while placing her hand on Charlotte's forehead.

Charlotte knew that her condition had not fully recovered. So she thought there might be a solution on the Demon King's castle and wanted to go there.

Turner must have opposed it all along, thinking it could be dangerous.

But today, Charlotte's power had another outbreak. With a gloomy voice, Turner, bowed before Charlotte's sleeping face, speaks to me.

"Reinhardt, may I ask you a difficult favor?"

I already knew what she was going to say without hearing it.

"Let's go together."

"…"

If something related to Charlotte's power were to happen, I would be the only one who could handle it, so it was obvious that she was asking me to accompany her to the Demon King's castle.

Without even hearing what she was asking, my response made her tremble, holding Charlotte's sleeping hand.

"Thank you… Reinhardt."

I believe it's something that must be done.

Perhaps this was what the emperor said I should do for Charlotte.

The next day.

With Turner's help, a rejuvenated Charlotte returns to her room, cleans herself up, and we meet again.

"To the Demon King's castle…? You're coming too?"

"Yes."

Charlotte looked apologetic, as if Turner had already explained everything to her.

“…It might be dangerous."

"How dangerous could the Demon King's castle be after the Demon King's death?"

Even saying this, I don't feel guilty at all.

To me, the Demon King is just like a puppy.

We will need the emperor's permission, but we should be able to go to the Demon King's castle.

Charlotte might not know, but we once escaped the Demon King's castle together, and now we're returning together.

This brings a strange sense of excitement to me.

Charlotte looks at me with a complicated expression. From losing her senses and clinging to me in tears yesterday, to hearing that I would accompany her to the Demon King's castle.

A mixture of embarrassment, gratitude, and guilt in Charlotte's expression was indescribable.

"Thank you. Really."

You said you always receive from me.

So, I'll give you whatever I can.

Charlotte added this with a flushed face.

—---

We weren't leaving for the Demon King's castle immediately. Since Saviolin Turner

had gone to seek permission from the Emperor, it was expected that some time would be needed. We had at least a few days before our departure.

I took care of what I needed to do.

I left the temple and headed for the Rotary Club.

"Are you comfortable here?"

"Yes, everyone is very kind."

In response to my question, Adriana answered with a bright smile.

For some reason, Loyar had become like a pet dog to Adriana, and the other club members seemed to naturally take care of various things, seeing how much Loyar liked Adriana.

I wasn't without worry, but it was fortunate that the other club members viewed Adriana favorably, thanks to Loyar's easygoing acceptance.

Adriana, having a diligent personality, seemed to be helping with various chores around the club's headquarters.

So it was no illusion that everyone's condition had improved compared to before.

Since we were here, Adriana and I took a walk around the Rotary Club together.

I wondered how Adriana felt.

She had been hurt by various events and was now living in hiding.

"How is Olivia?"

Yet, Adriana seemed more concerned about Olivia than herself.

"Well… Her personality has changed a bit, but ultimately, she seems to be coping well."

"That's a relief…"

Adriana had a dream for her future but gave it up. She tried to return to her original life, but even that was taken away from her.

Adriana must feel vague and empty.

She wouldn't know what to do next.

Like Olivia, who became disillusioned not only with religion but also with humanity.

Was Adriana going through the same stages as Olivia had?

"Those who were taught to love me threatened me, and those who were taught to hate me all their lives saved me."

Everything she believed in her life would feel completely invalidated. She might be living quietly here, but there was no doubt that such thoughts tormented Adriana.

In reality, if she had returned to the temple or entered a monastery, she would have been summoned immediately for an investigation of what had happened.

And the mere fact that she was rescued by demons would have been fatal.

She didn't know it, but she was being protected by the demons.

By me and Loyar.

"I don't know what I should live for anymore."

Adriana gazed up at the clear blue winter sky and smiled sadly.

Forced to learn the truth she didn't want to know, Adriana had lost her way.

Though I am the prince of the Demon World and the heir to Darkland, I do not know what lies within the Demon King's castle.

However, I have no intention of going there without knowing anything.

Even if I don't know, there will be those who do.

After a brief walk with Adriana, I called Loyar outside.

"How long has it been since the Council's business ended, and where are you going again?"

"Well."

The conversation revolved around the failed plans of the lord and the constant wandering.

"I'm thinking of going back to the Demon King's Castle."

"To the Demon King's Castle…? You really mean it?"

At the mention of the Demon King's Castle, Loyar's expression turned into a surprised one.

"As you know, I lost my memories, so I have no idea what's in the Demon King's Castle. So, do you happen to know if there's a hidden chamber there? A place that humans couldn't have discovered."

At my words, Loyar tilted her head.

“…How would I know that?"

"Weren't you at the Demon King's Castle before? You said I used to torment you."

"…”

At my words, Loyar glared at me with a dumbfounded expression. Could she have developed something like PTSD?

"Your Highness, I was neither a noble nor a royal of Darkland back then, so there's no way I would know. I'm not sure if such a thing exists."

“…Right."

I asked Loyar something that I should have known, but lost my memories. Of course, there was no way Loyar would know.

"Then, I guess Eleris and Sarkegaar wouldn't know either?"

"Isn't that highly unlikely?"

It's information that only the royals would likely know.

I could try searching for it blindly, but there's no need to do that.

The royals of Darkland, excluding me who lost my memories.

There must be at least one.

"Would Airi know anything?"

"Isn't that highly unlikely?"

She said the same thing again.

Do you not want to deal with me?

Although it's inconvenient to go all the way to Edina Archipelago to ask, it's important to get accurate information. It would be better than taking unnecessary steps.

Some time has passed since my first encounter with Airi, so I should find out how she's been doing.

However, there's no connection to the Edina Archipelago through the Warp Gate.

Therefore, unless I go with a magician who can use teleportation magic, I have to travel by boat, which would take a very long time.

But with Lucinil's help, I can make a quick trip and not have to leave my place empty for days.

Returning to the Demon King's Castle.

And the things that might still remain there.

I wonder if Airi knows anything about them.

CHAPTER 346

To head to the Edina Archipelago, I needed Lucinil.

It wasn't an urgent matter, but there was no need to delay it either. Thus, I entrusted a letter for Count Argon Ponteus to the Rotary Club.

Even though I wore the Ring of Sarkegaar, I had no intention of visiting Count Argon Ponteus's house directly, as I had to be cautious about my movements.

I left the Rotary Club headquarters and headed to the prearranged contact point.

Since it would take some time for my message to reach its destination, I waited until late at night.

The meeting place was in the lower reaches of the Irine River, just a little off the main road.

It was a very secluded spot.

If there was plenty of time, waiting like this would be possible. However, if I were in a hurry, this method would be difficult.

Although I had no choice but to stay at Count Argon Ponteus's mansion for now, I thought I should make arrangements to contact Lucinil more conveniently.

How long did I kill time by the riverside in the darkness?

Swoosh

As if a faint mist gathered from the void, it soon took the shape of a silver-hAirid girl.

Thud

"Hello, Archdemon?" she said, as she gently landed on the ground and looked up at me.

"Have you arrived?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"But what was that just now? Is it like teleportation?"

"Huh? Oh… this?"

Lucinil briefly demonstrated the ability to become blurry and turn into mist, then materialize once again.

"It's a vampire ability. It's not teleportation. I can move quickly, though."

The ability to transform into mist. Eleris had never shown me such an ability before. Was it a power unique to the Wednesday Clan?

Did each clan have their own unique abilities?

While I was wondering about that on my own, Lucinil put her hand on her waist.

"Anyway, you needed me?"

"Yes, I need you to accompany me somewhere immediately."

"Where?"

"It's a place called the Edina Archipelago in the southern part of the Empire. Do you know it?"

At my question, Lucinil crossed her arms as if she couldn't believe it.

"What do you think I've been doing all these years? I usually know geography-related information. Although sometimes there are cases where a country I knew disappears."

Had my question been too shallow for someone who had lived so many years? Lucinil tilted her head as she looked at me.

"What do you want to do in that southern island nation?"

"I have someone to meet there."

I simply told Lucinil that, knowing that even if I explained further, she wouldn't understand.

However, Lucinil seemed to have an attitude that she didn't care what I did. It was neither opposition nor agreement.

Lucinil looked around.

"Alright. There doesn't seem to be anyone around, so shall we go now? The distance is quite far, so I'll have to cast the spell several times in a row."

"Yes, let's go."

Lucinil concentrated her mind and began casting Mass Teleport.

Both Lucinil and Eleris.

Their personalities were quite different, yet they were both equally reliable.

Located at the southernmost point of the empire, the Edina Archipelago was so far from the mainland that it lay beyond the range of even the large warp gates. As a result, one would normally have to travel there by boat.

There were warp gates installed on the islands themselves for inter-island travel, but they were not connected to the mainland.

-Pop!

Lucinil cast several consecutive teleportation spells.

I was able to arrive in the port city of Lazak, in the Edina Archipelago, where I had previously visited the Grantz family's villa.

As soon as we arrived in the outskirts of Lazak, Lucinil's eyes sparkled.

"Wow! It's snowing here?"

The Edina Archipelago was not a tropical region, so it was also winter here, and the surrounding area was covered with heavy snow. Lucinil enjoyed stepping on the crunchy snow.

“…You've seen snow in the Council before."

Hadn't she complained about the snow being tiresome then?

"Archdemon, is the snow blowing in the windy places the same as this gentle snowfall in a quiet and cozy harbor town?"

"What's the difference, really?"

"Ah, seeing someone much younger than me act like an old man who's seen it all is quite refreshing."

It was truly strange that Lucinil's sensibilities had not died despite living for so long. Anyway, we stood on the outskirts of Lazak, looking at the snow-covered port city.

"Anyway, who are we supposed to meet?"

"A friend? Colleague? Someone who runs a tavern."

Honestly, I barely remembered anything about Airi, apart from her pink hair. I had the opportunity to visit her last time but didn't. Upon hearing my words, Lucinil tilted her head.

"A tavern? What on earth does your grand dream of reconstructing Darkland have to do with your colleague running a tavern in a remote village in the southernmost part of the continent?"

"I've decided to think of it as the first step towards gaining control of the empire's finances, but the details are a bit complicated and vague, making it hard to explain."

“…Really? I guess it is what it is."

"Good."

Lucinil gazed blankly at the falling snowflakes, as if to say, 'if you say so.'

This guy, she helps with everything but is rather neglectful. It's as if she's saying, "I don't care, do what you want."

At least Eleris was curious about my intentions.

Just do it your way. I'll help, but if you die or anything, it's not my fault.

Should I describe it like that?

Is this what it means to be versatile?

"Anyway, don't call me Archdemon anywhere from now on. I'd rather not attract any strange attention."

Although I knew there would be no one here who could recognize me, I had changed my face to a completely different one, not as Reinhardt.

"Got it, Reinhardt."

"Fine."

Not looking like Reinhardt, but still called Reinhardt. It wasn't a particularly rare name, so it seemed reasonable.

—---

Having entered Lazak, they inquired about Airi's tavern. They didn't even know the name of the establishment; they simply asked if there was a tavern with many succubi nearby.

They thought they could easily find it since it was already quite famous, almost causing a family ruin across the city when they last visited.

"…?"

However, a passerby frowned upon hearing their question.

"What are you talking about?"

“…Pardon?"

"That tavern closed down quite some time ago."

Having said that, the passerby walked away briskly.

It had closed down?

They had been too busy dealing with affairs in the Imperial City to keep up with the latest news from the Edina Archipelago.

What had happened to Airi in the meantime?

"Seems like a strange situation?"

“…Doesn't it?"

Lucinil and the protagonist exchanged glances, but as they both knew nothing, staring at each other wouldn't provide any answers.

They continued walking and stopped passersby to ask more questions. Most responses were that they knew the tavern, but it had closed down, so there was no point in going.

"Ah, that tavern? Too bad. I used to go there quite often…”

The person they talked to appeared to be a drunkard, tipsy from alcohol. The intoxicated man smacked his lips.

"Are the tavern staff… those people safe?"

At their question, the man frowned.

"Safe? You're asking if they're safe? Ha, haha. Hahaha…”

He laughed as if they'd asked a ridiculous question and moved past them.

Had something happened to Airi and the succubi?

Had they been found out and severely punished or even killed?

They had seemed to be doing well in business, but they knew of many cases where

families were ruined.

Had this become a problem leading to a public outcry…?

Such dreadful possibilities swirled in their minds.

They stopped the next passerby and asked.

This time, it was a middle-aged woman.

"I heard there was a famous tavern in Lazak with many succubi, but it seems to have closed down. Do you know what happened?"

“…Why do you ask?"

The woman frowned upon seeing a stranger getting straight to the point.

"I just want to make sure they didn't get hurt or anything…”

"Hurt? They're not the type to get hurt."

“…Excuse me?"

"Those damned creatures! They're not worth worrying about. It would have been better if they had died! Ptui!"

The middle-aged woman spat as if disgusted and walked away.

What was going on?

What had happened?

The answer came from the next person they spoke to.

"Oh, you're talking about those women?"

This person didn't seem particularly interested in alcohol or regretful about the tavern's closure.

The tavern owner had closed up shop quite some time ago and switched to the

money lending business.

What?

What on earth was this?

The old man I'd been speaking to pointed to a certain direction in Lazak.

There stood a rather large and prominent stone building.

"Looks like they're not catering to people like us with small change, but rather focusing on providing loans to ship owners and nobles who mainly lead trade fleets. Judging by the fact that they've closed their original business, they must be doing quite well."

It wasn't that the business had failed.

Rather, it had gone so well that there was no longer a need to run the tavern. As a passerby walked past, Lucinil grabbed my sleeve with a blank expression.

"Is this that thing you mentioned earlier… the Imperial authorization or something like that?"

"Well… it seems like it."

"Why on earth didn't you expect this either?"

The suggestion to strive for Imperial authorization had been made casually, but had the tavern already been closed and transitioned to a money lending system?

Just how much money had been made?

Lucinil and I walked toward the building that the passerby had pointed out.

Airi's tavern had been thriving in the middle of the night. Thus, the regular customers seemed to be disappointed to see it transformed into a money lending business.

Pawnbroking, debt, money lending.

It seemed to be called such, but the stone building Lucinil and I arrived at appeared to be more of a financial institution than anything else.

What's the difference between a large-scale pawnbroking business and a financial institution?

We had expected to see a tavern bustling at midnight, but when on earth had this building been built?

[Angel Capital]

The company name was even engraved at the entrance of the towering building.

"I don't know much about finance, but the combination of angels and money lending doesn't seem to fit well together."

“…I think so too."

Lucinil muttered in disbelief.

Despite the late hour, bright lights shone from within the building.

And there seemed to be a commotion near the entrance.

A young woman in a black suit and a middle-aged man with a protruding belly were in a dispute.

It wasn't Airi, but it seemed certain that one of the succubi I had rescued was involved.

"Hey, just let it slide this time. I've told you several times that my money is tied up, right?"

"Captain, how many times have I told you? You must adhere to the interest payment due date. We run our business on tight finances, and there have been numerous occasions where we've been ruined because the due dates haven't been met. I've repeatedly warned you to stick to the agreed-upon due dates and about the penalties for not meeting them, haven't I?"

"Yeah, I know. Of course, I know. But did I know that things would turn out like this? Just give me one week, one week, and I'll pay you triple the interest I owe. Seriously, who knew that my financial channels would suddenly be blocked? This has never happened before, you know?"

"Captain, I understand we have a relationship, and I would like to help you, but this is not a matter I can decide on my own ship. I must follow strict guidelines. The amount of interest is not the issue here. Once, we allowed an extension of a deadline, and it caused a major disruption in our financial liquidity, ruining a big business deal. I'm truly sorry, Captain."

"Yuria… Please, I beg you. Do you think I, the captain of a Lenos-class trading ship, would care about such a small amount of interest? I've never fretted over money like this in my life. Please, just this once, for the sake of our friendship. Hmm? What do you say? Do you think I would face bankruptcy over such an amount? If you can help me just this once, I promise to repay the favor."

The unfolding scene made my head hurt.

What on earth was going on?

At the persistence of the middle-aged man, Yuria, the Succubus who was called forth, let out a weary sigh.

"Fine. Our relationship goes back more than a day or two, Captain. But you must understand, this is the last time I can help you like this. If the deadline is missed again, it won't be your problem alone – my neck will be on the line as well. Do you understand? You must value me as much as I value you."

"Of course! When have I ever broken a promise with you, huh?! Except for this time, of course! Haha!"

"Alright, I'll give you a one-week extension, but you must be prepared next time. After that, even I won't be able to help you."

"Great! In a week, I'll repay not only the interest but also the principal!"

The middle-aged man, reassured by the promise of an extension, let out a hearty laugh and left.

After he left, the capital employee, presumably the Succubus named Yuria, turned her attention to us, standing blankly near the entrance.

"Are you visitors?"

"In a manner of speaking…"

At my words, Yuria scratched her cheek as if she felt sorry for us.

"I apologize. Angel Capital only provides financial services to a select group of VIP clients. We are not accepting new clients unless they have a referral from an existing member."

It was a loan shark operation.

However, it wasn't the type that targeted ordinary citizens.

How they ended up here from the bar was unclear, but the scale of the operation suggested it was wildly successful.

Right now, I am neither the person I was as Valier nor as Reinhardt. So, they wouldn't recognize me.

"Tell the boss that 'the last remaining family member' has come. They'll understand."

"…!"

There were many ways to summon Airi.

Though we were not blood relatives, we were the last remaining family.

The royalty of Darkland.

Airi would understand that apart from herself, I was the only other family member.

"…I will inform them. Please follow me."

And if Yuria was a Succubus, she would have no choice but to understand.

CHAPTER 347

Upon hearing my words alone, Yuria seemed to have realized who I was.

It was the mention of being the only remaining family that gave it away.

I was led to the Capital building along with Lucinil and soon got to witness various scenes unfolding inside.

Even at this hour, employees were engaged in conversations in their offices, seemingly conducting consultations. Some individuals didn't seem to be succubi.

As we entered a restricted area, inaccessible to unauthorized personnel, we observed sights not visible from the outside.

A succubus employee was briefing a group of armed individuals on various precautions.

"Be careful not to cause any trouble. Of course, everyone should know that our work involves legal repossession. Let's be mindful of the limits."

"Roger!"

"Roger!"

"Understood!"

Are they debt collectors? The succubus employee, who seemed to be in charge, crossed her arms and nodded.

"You may hurt people, but remember that any damage to the repossessed goods counts as a loss. If you break something valuable while trying to intimidate, as you did last time, you'll be held responsible for the compensation."

"Yessir!"

"Roger!"

"Understood!"

"Of course, you should know that if the collection is not resolved within the deadline, there will be consequences…"

Could it be?

Are the debt collectors slaves too?

My head began to spin, listening to the honeyed tones delivering malicious words.

Airi.

Did she have a talent for this? As a writer who merely penned words in my room, I couldn't begin to guess how she had gotten this far!

Yuria led us up a staircase, ascending to the fourth floor where a room labeled "President's Office" awaited.

Ding!

Yuria rang the bell to announce our presence, cautiously opening the door.

"Oh, I'm busy."

A slightly sharper, yet familiar voice resonated from beyond the door.

"Madam President, an extremely important guest has arrived."

"I thought I told you I'm not meeting any nobles or royalty yet. Tell them to leave."

What on earth was she talking about?

"It's your only remaining family member… they've come to see you."

"Family? What do you mean by… No, it can't be!"

Before she could even finish her sentence, the sound of frantic footsteps approached, and the door flung open.

No longer needing to hide, I reverted to my original form using the Sarkegaar ring.

Back to being Valier.

There stood the pink-haired succubus queen, Airi.

"Ah."

Upon seeing me return to Valier's form, Airi gazed at me for a moment before embracing my neck tightly.

Wham!

"Valier…!"

"Uh, um… Have you been well?"

Although I had an idea of how much Airi cared for me, she still felt somewhat unfamiliar to me.

Overwhelmed with joy, Airi held me tightly for a while, unwilling to let go.

Named Angel Capital, this office appeared more aligned with devils than angels, seeming to be involved in the business of usury.

Upon leaving the office, Lucinil and Airi were seated at a guest table.

Soon, the secretary brought out some black tea.

"Ah, I won't be having any. You don't need to serve me."

As Airi tried to pour tea into Lucinil's cup, Lucinil covered the cup with her hand and shook her head.

"……?"

"This side is……"

"If you know about Eleris, then you must know about the Vampire Lord. I am Lucinil, the lord of the house of Wednesday."

"Vampire Lord……?"

Upon hearing Lucinil's introduction, Airi absentmindedly nodded her head. Although I didn't quite understand the significance, it seemed that Airi was quite surprised to have received the help of another Vampire Lord.

"……Somehow, I ended up receiving help."

Come to think of it, I didn't know what positions Sarkegaar, Loyar, and Eleris held within the demon army.

All I knew was that they had infiltrated the empire as part of an infiltration mission.

I realized that my knowledge of the demon world was sorely lacking, and I didn't know much about my own subordinates either. Airi stared at Lucinil for a while before slightly bowing her head.

"It doesn't seem like you've made an alliance with Valier. My name is Airi."

Airi briefly introduced herself and then looked at me.

"You must have many questions, Valier."

"……Indeed. What is going on with all of this?"

I couldn't grasp how the business was being conducted, what scale it was on, or what methods were being used.

"It's because there are limits to how much can be achieved through simple trade to control the financial world."

It was an obvious statement.

However, pursuing that goal wouldn't have been an easy task.

Airi had ambitions of seizing the empire's finances and causing an economic crisis. Of course, I only told her to do so because I thought she needed a purpose to live, and

I didn't have any particular expectations.

But Airi was seriously pursuing that goal, and it seemed that she had achieved far more than I had anticipated.

"I didn't know anything at first, so I sought a lot of advice from the guests."

It started with a tavern. And a tavern naturally attracted people.

In the early days, there were many problems due to troublesome customers, but Airi and the succubi had no issue dealing with drunken troublemakers.

As word of mouth spread and numerous people started to frequent the establishment, Airi created a VIP system.

It was a hostess service for those who bought extremely expensive drinks.

Airi conversed with them, gradually increasing her understanding of capital.

How to make money. How to manage money. And how they had made their money.

There were those who inherited their wealth, those who were born into it, but countless others had started with nothing and achieved success.

"I considered real estate and investment, but I determined that there was nothing better for quickly increasing the scale of capital in a short period. That's why I started."

“……Is it something that can be easily achieved just by trying?"

"Connections with those who have money are more important than money itself."

Although Airi made money running a tavern, she built even more important connections. She would borrow when needed, and receive investments when necessary.

It all seemed too easy for Airi.

"Of course, I do this for the money, but the main reason is that I can use money as a tool to ensnare people."

Airi took a sip of her tea.

As she put down her teacup, Airi showed a faint smile.

"If you bind them with debt, you can turn anyone into a slave, regardless of their social status."

It didn't matter whether the person was a noble, a royal, or a wealthy merchant.

Money and debt were power in themselves. If you bind someone with a huge amount of debt, you own them. Everything they have becomes yours, and they become a slave, groveling at your feet.

The hornless succubus queen performed a bizarre act, enslaving others not through charm but with money as her weapon.

Although money lending itself has a negative image, Airi conducted her business in a slightly different context.

She wasn't in it to make money.

She lent money to ensnare people.

To turn people into her slaves.

"So… what's going on now?"

"I no longer run the tavern, but I'm still in the money lending business, targeting my VIP customers from back then. You know that Lazak is a port city, and this port is bustling with ships going to and returning from the continent, right? So, captains and merchant fleets load the most valuable trade goods onto their ships and head for the continent to maximize their profits. The same goes for when they return. Merchants sell those goods, earning profits ranging from four to five times or even dozens of times their investment."

"I see."

"In order to do this, of course, they can't rely on their own money alone. They take on huge debts to load expensive trade goods or receive investments. They agree to pay a certain percentage of their future profits."

She probably received shares in the merchant fleets in exchange for her investments. She was well aware of such matters.

"People are greedy. After making a fortune from one trade, they won't try to do business safely without debts, using only their own ships. Once they see profits, they take on even more debt or receive more investments to expand their fleet, and hire more crew members and captains. Endlessly. The process keeps repeating. No one is an exception."

Airi must have witnessed the behavior of these people. She had tasted their insatiable desires from the stories of captains who returned from long voyages.

According to the captains and fleet owners, those involved in usury lend money to the greedy fleet owners at exorbitant interest rates. If they fail to repay the debt, the lenders seize the ships and their cargo. It's a profitable structure as long as the fleet doesn't encounter a storm and disappear altogether.

Iri had not only met with captains.

Many local influential figures visited, and she heard countless stories.

Captains who embarked on long voyages for trade.

Fleet owners who employed these captains to operate trade fleets.

Loan sharks who lent money to these fleet owners.

She had grasped the hierarchy of money-makers while running a tavern.

However, Airi's case seemed to have a slightly different meaning when it came to usury.

It made them slaves.

That's the resonance the word had.

"So, I lend them money, and if they can't meet the interest payment deadline, I raise the interest rate or collect additional fees, or if that doesn't work, I take a stake in their fleet or their trade goods."

It was evident that Airi was making a fortune.

"But at this rate, it would take too long. So, I'm using a different method."

What Airi dreamed of was seizing control of the empire's financial power. She had been incredibly successful so far, but it was still not enough.

"I deliberately sabotage the finances of captains, fleet owners, merchants, and traders who borrow money from the capital. I make them borrow up to their limit, then ensure they have no surplus funds when it's time to pay the interest."

“…What?!"

"Simply put, I force them into bankruptcy. Piling default upon default. I brand them insolvent, reducing their credit to zero. Then, I can enforce the seizure."

I couldn't help but be taken aback by the unexpected revelation.

If you control the flow of funds in the market, you can cause such trouble by just clamping down on any financial route momentarily.

"If I make three large trade fleets go bankrupt simultaneously, the loan sharks, merchants, and local fleets in the Edina Archipelago involved with them will collapse too. It's a chain reaction of bankruptcies."

When large trade fleets go bankrupt and seizures begin, not only the loan sharks who were supposed to collect money from them but also the local fleets scheduled to transport the incoming cargo lose their goods, and those entangled with them also fall into ruin.

A chain reaction of bankruptcies among subcontractors following the collapse of a large corporation.

"With large fleets ruined, merchants can no longer buy or sell trade goods."

"Captains lose their ships."

"Crew members lose their jobs."

"Jobless sailors can't afford to drink."

"And then taverns can't sell alcohol and go bankrupt."

"Like dominoes, they topple one after another."

"The economy will be paralyzed."

With a calm expression, Airi drained the last drop of the red tea in her teacup.

So, the goal wasn't really about having slaves or whatever?

To bring down the national economy? Why on earth?

"You want to cause an economic crisis instead of making money? Why?"

At my incredulous question, Airi grinned.

"The goal is to eliminate the Edina Archipelago's trade cartel."

“…What?"

Again, she said something unexpected.

"How much money do you think I'd need to control the market's cash flow? No matter how much money I have, it's not enough."

Airi gazed out the office window.

"This is all possible because the Edina Royal Bank is supporting us."

A loan shark with unlimited credit.

"It's not that the Edina Archipelago doesn't have a super-sized warp gate connecting to the continent, but rather, they can't build one even if they want to. If they just install a super-sized warp gate on the uninhabited island in the middle of the route, the problem of distance would be solved, right?"

“…You can't be serious."

"Yeah, they can't build it because of the organized obstruction by the trade cartel."

It wasn't that the Edina Archipelago couldn't install a super-sized warp gate.

It was because a large profit group, which made a living through maritime trade, opposed its installation.

And all those talks about the royal family.

Airi was in a secret alliance with the Edina Archipelago's royal family.

"If the economy goes into crisis due to the bankruptcy of large trade fleets, the Edina Archipelago will have no choice but to install a super-sized warp gate for the overall improvement of their economic situation. They will then cooperate with the empire to push for the construction of the warp gate."

“…Wow."

It was astonishing and surprising.

I had sent her to a place without a super-sized warp gate, but now she was trying to create one with her own hands.

It left me speechless.

"In return, I'll get ninety percent of the stakes in the operation of the super-sized warp gate."

Not the domination of the large fleets, but their collapse.

And after that, monopolizing the trade rights between the Edina Archipelago and the continent.

That was the picture Airi was painting.

“…How am I supposed to accept that you sent me to a place difficult for the empire to reach, only to build a bridge?"

At my complaint, Airi gave a bitter smile.

"You're walking on thin ice in the empire, and I don't want to believe that I'm safe here without any risk while you solve everything for me."

Airi believed that she, too, could do something and was trying to contribute in any way possible. She even told me not to sell themselves as slaves to humans to raise capital.

In the end, Airi had connections not only on her own but also with the Edina Archipelago's royal family.

Otherwise, it would have been impossible to launch a project of this scale.

"Anyway, the Edina Archipelago relies too heavily on maritime trade. If a giant warp gate were to be built connecting the continent and the archipelago, the social costs involved in fleet operations would decrease, and the economic situation would be much better than it is now. So, the royal family has wanted to build a giant warp gate for a very long time."

"Are you saying that those involved in maritime trade have been blocking this?"

"Yes."

Maritime traders are an indispensable presence in the Edina Archipelago.

"Whenever discussions about building warp gates begin, maritime trade cartels threaten to strike en masse and paralyze the national economy. They've made good on these threats more than once, causing the economy to falter. It takes time to build a giant warp gate, and they're concerned about how the archipelago would fare without maritime trade in the meantime."

The maritime trade cartels have held the lifeline of the people of the Edina Archipelago, continuously threatening them. Although their actual utility had diminished, they had managed to maintain their grip on the archipelago's leadership through strikes and threats.

"That's why the royal family wants to completely eradicate the maritime trade cartels. Of course, there will be bloodshed and chaos, but they've determined that it's better to build the giant warp gate and collapse the cartels entirely. And well, if I fail, the royal family will cut its losses."

If Airi's true intention to collapse the entire maritime trade cartel becomes apparent, and she becomes a target, the royal family can simply withdraw.

"It's too risky."

"Indeed."

"Even if everything works out as you say, there's a clear possibility that the royal family of the Edina Kingdom will stab you in the back later on."

If things go wrong, they can just cut their losses, and even if things go according to Airi's plan, the royal family could still betray her.

She's taking on enormous risks.

"No, Valier, that won't happen."

However, Airi seemed confident that she wouldn't be betrayed.

"Why?"

"You know why, don't you?"

Airi showed a subtle smile.

"Being loved is just too easy for us."

The fleet owners she intends to topple.

Someone from the royal family secretly collaborating with her.

Everyone loved her, and she knew she wouldn't be abandoned with that look in her eyes.

The Queen of the Succubi.

Even without her horns, Airi's confidence seemed unshaken.

"There might already be people who think my actions are suspicious, even crossing the line. That's why I'm not engaging in business with civilians who don't know me

well."

She claimed it was just a game with those who had already fallen for her, for themselves.

Airi told Valier not to worry about that aspect at all.

CHAPTER 348

Although Airi, a succubus, lacked the characteristic power of charm, she didn't need such a thing as she successfully seduced influential locals while running a tavern.

Airi said that the important thing was that stage, and now that they were progressing, there would be no particular difficulty.

It was all about deceiving and exploiting those whose hearts they had already won over.

How were they going to handle the malice they would receive from people after all of this was over? Was there already a plan in place for that?

Just as I was taking risks on my own, Airi was also willing to take risks even if I didn't want her to.

"Wait just a little longer, Valier."

Airi smiled at me.

"The day when I'll dedicate the Edina Archipelago to you is not far off."

She aimed to swallow up the entire Edina Archipelago, beyond just monopolizing trade rights.

When I first met the succubus prisoners, all I wanted was for them to live peacefully.

When I talked about seizing control of the empire's financial power, I thought it was okay to have such a dream as long as it gave purpose to life.

However, watching Airi's actions, I couldn't help but think that achieving that goal was far from impossible.

"I agree with you. Let's restrain ourselves from taking on overly dangerous tasks."

"Alright. Thanks for worrying about me."

We might have originally been hostile to each other, but since I saved her, Airi had changed her attitude towards me. I didn't know what kind of past I had with Airi, so I didn't think much of it.

In the process of checking on how Airi was doing in the Edina Archipelago, I learned some unexpected things.

If Airi succeeded in the Edina Archipelago, eventually, this side would also have its own use. I couldn't know exactly what that use would be at the moment.

"Anyway, I came here because I'm curious."

Finally, I could get to the main point.

"Curious about what?"

"I'll be returning to the Demon King's Castle soon, and I want to know what's there."

“…The Demon King's Castle?"

"Yeah."

"It's still occupied by the imperial army. Even if you're disguised as a human…”

"There won't be a problem since I'm going with the royal family's permission."

"Ah, I see. But what do you want to ask me… Oh, right, you lost your memory…”

Airi seemed to have roughly guessed what I wanted to find when I returned there.

"There's a restricted area in the Demon King's Castle that only the royal family could enter. But humans must have searched it thoroughly. I doubt anything useful would be left…”

I wanted to go to the Demon King's Castle with the vague hope that Charlotte and Saviolin Turner might know something.

However, even if something remained in the Demon King's Castle, I wanted to understand it, whether or not it had anything to do with saving Charlotte.

The Demon King's Castle would still have people there for excavation or research purposes, so it wouldn't be a place I could visit at any time, even if I took on Reinhardt's appearance.

The opportunity is now.

According to Airi, there exists a restricted area accessible only to royalty.

However, was it not protected by a physical barrier? If it has already been plundered, there would be nothing left to gain there. Airi furrowed her brow, deep in thought.

"I'm not sure, but there must be a place in the Demon King's castle that only the Demon King can enter. It would naturally be sealed off to prevent anyone else from entering… There's a definite possibility that humans haven't found it yet."

Airi was uncertain, but she believed such a place might exist.

"How do you know about this place?"

“…Occasionally, the previous Demon King would take you somewhere within the Demon King's castle."

Airi had no choice but to know about the memories that I, as Valier, did not possess, and about what had transpired in the Demon King's castle.

"I don't know where exactly it is, and even when I asked my mother, she never answered me as if it were a secret. She seemed to know something, though."

"So, there's a secret space of that sort?"

"Probably. I don't know the specifics of where it is, though."

The place that the previous Demon King occasionally took Valier to.

Airi's mother, who had been one of the Four Heavenly Kings, knew something but didn't tell Airi.

There was a possibility that humans had already found the place, but there was also a chance they hadn't.

The secret chamber within the Demon King's castle that the previous Demon King took his son to from time to time.

Something must be there.

I must find out what it is.

My brief reunion with Airi came to an end.

"I could go in a few days."

Airi watched me, seemingly reluctant, as I insisted on leaving immediately.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have time."

“...I understand."

Airi cautiously cast her eyes down.

Originally, Valier had been a useless, arrogant brat who relied on his father's power, and Airi, the daughter of the succubus queen, had been the one to discipline him.

Now that the demon world had been destroyed, we were the last remaining members of the royal family of a ruined kingdom.

Airi approached me and gently held both of my hands.

"Please stay safe, Valier."

As I met her gaze, I felt an odd sensation, which made me feel strangely uneasy.

Was it because the succubus queen's race was inherently easy to love?

No.

That wasn't it.

Although I was not Valier, I felt a bizarre sensation as if Valier was reacting to her.

Valier had been tormented by Airi, but somehow, I instinctively knew.

A strange certainty that Valier would have liked Airi.

The odd sensation I felt just by looking into Airi's eyes convinced me of this.

In the original history, Airi would have become a slave in the empire, and Valier would have died wandering the wasteland.

Of course, I am not Valier.

I am not captivated by the succubus race either.

So.

"Don't push yourself too hard either."

"Yes."

I simply asked Airi how she was doing, a question stemming from the camaraderie between us.

It seemed as if no time had passed since I had gone to the Edina Archipelago, and the return trip was just as swift.

Lucinil had offered to accompany me to the Demon King's Castle and keep watch from a distance, but I had declined.

The area around the Demon King's Castle was already tightly held by human forces, and I already had Saviolin Turner as a companion. There was a chance that an unexpected encounter between her and Lucinil could lead to complications.

Thus, Lucinil decided it would be better to stay in the Imperial Palace and assist in Sarkegaar's mission.

There was a secret space within the Demon King's Castle.

However, neither Airi nor I knew where it was located.

And if we were to find the place, we would have to enter it without being seen by others – yet we had no concrete plan for how to do that.

Fortunately, Charlotte's condition did not worsen before we set out for the Demon King's Castle.

In the Royal Class dormitory, Saviolin Turner covertly summoned me.

It was nighttime. Outside the Royal Class dormitory, I stood facing Saviolin Turner in the dimly lit space.

"His Majesty has granted his permission. We depart in two days."

"Yes."

As I calmly replied, Saviolin Turner suddenly gripped my shoulder.

She stared into my eyes with a serious expression.

"Reinhardt, I asked you to accompany me out of my own selfishness, but it seems that you do not fully understand the risks involved in this matter."

“…Risks?"

"Yes. Her Highness, the Princess, is very negative about you coming along."

Charlotte had thanked me but also said it was dangerous and that I did not have to go.

Had she been worrying about it for days?

Were there still unknown threats in the Demon King's Castle?

Did Charlotte think I was being too reckless, so she was negative about me accompanying her?

"If the Demon King's Castle is dangerous…”

"No, that's not the issue."

As if I completely misunderstood, she shook her head.

"I have no interest in politics and probably shouldn't, but I am in a position where I can avoid getting involved in political matters. This is not self-praise, but a simple fact."

The strongest knight on the continent.

Her influence and authority alone allowed her to live free from politics if she wished.

But it seemed that it was not the case for me.

I was aware of that.

The weak living in the midst of politics cannot remain neutral. That is only possible after securing power or influence.

When she mentioned politics instead of physical danger, I thought I had understood what Saviolin Turner was trying to say.

"Are you talking about… Bertus?"

"Yes."

Bertus and Charlotte.

I had somewhat forgotten about the issue between the two of them. Charlotte valued me highly, and it had been quite some time since Bertus had made any moves against me.

In the Demon King's realm, there are countless people. And the fact that the Princess and I are heading there directly isn't something we can hide. So, if you go with us, that truth will eventually be revealed."

"…"

If I go to the Demon King's realm with Charlotte, Bertus will eventually find out.

He will know that I have firmly sided with Charlotte.

"You've already received the royal crest. Soon, His Highness the Crown Prince will know that you are the master of Tiamat."

And on top of that, there's the matter of the Champions of Tu'an.

It's not information Bertus can miss that Ellen and I have received the royal emblem together.

The importance of my position in the country has undeniably increased, and it's clear that I stand with Charlotte.

That means, simply by going to the Demon King's realm, I will inevitably make Bertus a definite enemy.

Saviolin Turner is not ignorant of politics, though she prefers not to be involved in political affairs.

So, it seemed as if she was warning me, thinking I didn't know the true danger of this matter.

"This is the last time, Reinhardt. I know it's strange for me to say this after making the request. If you deem the situation too dangerous, you don't have to come. Her Highness wishes that as well."

Charlotte seemed to not want to put me in danger any longer.

If I go to the Demon King's realm with Charlotte, I will eventually make Bertus my enemy.

But what would change if I just stay still?

My identity as a Champion of Tu'an will inevitably be revealed anyway.

I need to not only cure Charlotte but also find out what remains in the Demon King's realm.

And I know that Saviolin Turner and Charlotte's concerns are nothing but unfounded.

The royal crest given to me.

That itself speaks for everything.

"I don't think Bertus is foolish enough to carelessly lay hands on the Champion of Tu'an."

"……”

A treatment on par with royalty?

No, it's even more than that.

At this point, Ellen and I are more important to humanity than the First Prince and Princess, or even the Emperor himself.

In such a situation, if someone tries to kill me or cause harm just because I'm on Charlotte's side, they will face the wrath of the furious Emperor.

Ellen and I are expendable in the fight against the Demon King, but until that moment, we must receive the utmost importance on the continent.

Ragan Artorius may not have utilized any political advantages, but I will not do the same.

Bertus will not be able to touch me.

As long as my true identity isn't exposed, he absolutely cannot touch me.

"So, I will go."

However, once Bertus becomes my enemy, can my identity remain hidden?

I cannot know that.

“…….Alright, convey that to Her Highness."

I know that my predetermined fate is approaching, and I cannot hide my true identity forever.

Champion of Tu'an.

That would protect me in every situation and political climate.

I had exposed the remnants of the demon world's power, escalating humanity's sense of crisis, and secured political justification to protect myself by becoming the champion of Tu’an.

It was a rather wicked act to establish my position by playing the savior in the crisis I had orchestrated, but that was the reality.

In the end, Eleris's words that Tiamata would be more useful politically proved to be true.

The day we decided to depart for the Demon King's realm.

"It's really okay. I won't be gone for long, and you don't have to be there…”

Charlotte trailed off with a gloomy expression. She was always grateful, but she also felt guilty for only receiving help from me and not being able to give anything in return.

Even though my political position was secure, this task entailed taking on a great risk.

So, on the day of departure, her wish for me not to go was evident.

"To think I'm hearing such words from the one who came to me in tears, clad in pajamas, and clung to me when the crisis struck. It's quite convincing."

"W-what?!"

Caught off guard by my sudden words, Charlotte's face flushed red. Saviolin Turner, who had finished preparing for departure, also had a baffled expression.

"It's useless to cry and call for help when the crisis hits. So just quietly come along."

"W-why are you saying it like that?!"

Charlotte's face turned red and blue as she began hitting me randomly.

"Yes, get angry like that instead."

“…What?"

Looking at Charlotte, who had a remorseful expression, I felt even more tormented.

"It makes me feel more at ease."

Charlotte stared blankly at me for a moment, her lips trembling, and then finally let out a wail.

“…You're really something else. You make people feel grateful and ungrateful at the same time. You're so strange!"

Charlotte strode forward, sniffling, and Saviolin Turner sighed as she watched me.

"You're one to talk, making light of blasphemous words so casually. But I find it stranger that I've grown used to your antics."

Normally, she would have jumped in when things got out of hand, but she had become so accustomed to my behavior that she only felt disconcerted now.

It seemed that Saviolin Turner also found it strange to grow accustomed to my antics.

CHAPTER 349

Somehow, I had found myself in Darkland during the summer vacation, and now, during the winter break, I was once again headed there.

Of course, this time, my companion was not Ellen, the next Hero, but the Princess and the greatest swordsman of the continent.

The place Ellen and I had ventured to was merely the outskirts of Darkland.

The Demon King's castle, our current destination, was situated deep within Darkland. The allied forces had advanced in a single-point breakthrough formation, successfully capturing the castle. However, there had been no exploration of the surrounding areas.

Although the adventurers had been leading the Darkland pioneering project, they had yet to search a vast area.

Our party consisted of only three people: myself, Saviolin Turner, and Charlotte. There was no need for additional escorts or attendants, as deploying a large force would only cause unnecessary commotion.

"We'll have to pass through quite a few warp gates, Your Highness."

"Yes."

The allied forces had built warp gates at regular intervals during their advance to secure supplies. Naturally, during the war, these warp gates would have been prime targets for the Demon King's army.

We planned to travel through the large warp gates to reach the Egsian forward base, then follow the allied forces' route directly to the Demon King's castle.

While it would take some time to activate the dormant gates, there wasn't much actual travel time involved, as a warp gate had been installed right in front of the castle after the war.

Charlotte wore a tense expression.

To her, the Demon King's castle must have seemed like hell itself.

She was returning to a place she never wanted to see again, only because there might be a slim chance of finding a clue to resolve her situation.

Undoubtedly, Charlotte's emotions were complicated at that moment, and I shared her feelings.

At present, the Demon King's castle was occupied by the Empire's forces. While they had thoroughly plundered the castle, the search and investigation of the entire place had not yet been completed.

Our party had quickly traveled through the warp gates, passing the Egsian forward base, and had managed to arrive at the Demon King's castle at an astonishing speed.

"…"

"…"

Both Charlotte and I were speechless as we looked upon the desolate sight of the castle.

The massive gray fortress stood beneath the clear blue winter sky.

The aftermath of the raging war could still be seen all around the Demon King's castle.

Traces of powerful magic and siege weaponry marked the castle walls.

"So this is… the Demon King's castle."

Saviolin Turner, who had not participated in the great war against the demons, was seeing the castle for the first time. I could not tell what emotions she felt as she looked upon the remnants of humanity's great victory.

Regardless of whether Bertus would find out, we had no intention of advertising our

arrival. If influential figures appeared at the garrison, it would undoubtedly cause an annoying commotion.

Hence, upon arriving at the castle, the three of us donned our robes to conceal our identities.

"Your Highness, I am Count Alfred, currently serving as the commander-in-chief of the Demon King's Castle garrison."

It seemed that only the commander, who had been informed of our arrival in advance, had come out to greet us alone, so as not to cause any unnecessary commotion. Charlotte and Saviolin Turner's concerns were palpable.

"Ah, I see. It's nice to meet you, Count Alfred."

Bertus would likely be aware that Charlotte's power is related to the Demon King; she simply chooses not to use it as a weapon.

Thus, Charlotte's visit to the Demon King's Castle garrison is under the pretense of an inspection. She whispered this explanation to me.

Although not always active, the presence of a warp gate here ensured that the garrison's supplies were in excellent condition. Instead of tents, proper buildings had been constructed around the Demon King's Castle, and the soldiers seemed more focused on reconnaissance and research than on combat.

Under the guidance of Commander Alfred, we headed towards the garrison's command center.

Our visit wasn't entirely top secret, but it wasn't public either. Only a select few, including the commander, knew we were coming today.

Count Alfred appeared to view me as a mere attendant.

After a brief meal with the commander, he escorted us to the command center's map room.

Charlotte's ostensible purpose was to check on the investigation of the Demon King's Castle.

In the middle of the map room was a table with a model of the castle's architecture, and the walls were covered in drawings that appeared to be targeting the Demon King's Castle.

"The Demon King's Castle is incredibly vast, as it was once the abode of the Demon King. Thus, our exploration is not yet complete."

"Is it that extensive?"

"Yes."

The architectural model included a detailed representation of the collapsed castle walls.

In reality, the Demon King's Castle was immense in scale.

Just as the Imperial Palace of Emperatos was enormous, so too was the Demon King's Castle.

While the Imperial Palace had one palace in each cardinal direction, the Demon King's Castle featured a massive central palace surrounded by countless auxiliary buildings of considerable size.

"There are still areas where traps are active, so we're proceeding with caution to prevent casualties until we have a thorough understanding…"

Charlotte's words seemed to be a criticism of their progress, and the commander mumbled uncomfortably.

"I think it's right to proceed cautiously since there's no rush. I didn't mean to criticize, Commander."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

The Demon King's Castle was so vast that the investigation was not yet complete.

The reason being that there were still areas with active traps.

Although there was a model of the castle's exterior, there were still unexplored areas on the targeting map.

Nevertheless, the commander began to explain, pointing at the targeting map and the three-dimensional model.

The auxiliary building, as large as a palace, was a barracks.

It was quite odd for me, the prince of the Demon Realm, to learn something new from a garrison commander.

"It is presumed that a standing army was stationed in the barracks. However, no matter how large it may be, it couldn't possibly accommodate all the numerous demons and monsters that fought against us during the Great Demon War. Hence, we assume that they must have conscripted demons residing in other regions."

"Indeed."

At the time of the Great Demon War, the Demon King's castle housed a military force far exceeding its capacity.

The commander added that there wouldn't have been so many soldiers in the castle during peacetime.

"On the first floor of the Demon King's Palace, there are facilities for living, including a dining hall and a banquet hall. And in the center of the palace, do you see this courtyard?"

"Yes."

The center of the Demon King's Palace was wide open, with a vast, open space.

There were destroyed pillars and statues.

Every piece of shattered debris was intricately depicted.

Even though it was just a model, one could sense that an extraordinary battle had taken place here on a massive scale.

"Could this be…?"

Charlotte looked at the commander, who nodded.

"Yes."

The enormous courtyard of the Demon King's Palace.

"This is where Ragan Artorius fought against the Demon King."

In the heart of the Demon Realm, the decisive battle between the hero and the Demon King had taken place.

Although we hadn't witnessed the battle, Charlotte and I had heard the earth-shattering noise.

Charlotte shivered slightly, and I silently swallowed.

The remnants of the Demon King.

Vaguely, Charlotte thought that if she could touch them, she might gain some knowledge or resolve her current situation.

"I need to visit this place."

So, it was only natural for Charlotte to say that.

The Demon King's castle was so vast that we each rode horses to get around.

I had learned horseback riding at the temple, so I was able to ride without any issues.

Since the castle was an investigation area, there were no people living inside unless they had a special mission.

Thus, there was a large village surrounding the castle, called the garrison.

It was unclear whether there had originally been a village for demons like the Demon King's castle nearby. If there hadn't been one, it never existed, but if there had been one, all traces of it would have vanished due to the war.

"Which areas are confirmed to be safe so far?"

At Charlotte's question, the commander answered.

"All the auxiliary buildings have been secured, and we have confirmed that there are no functioning traps on the ground level of the Demon King's castle. However, the underground is still dangerous, so please refrain from venturing there. As long as you don't go too deep underground, there shouldn't be any major issues."

This meant there was nothing to discover on the ground level of the Demon King's castle.

Would I have to go underground to learn whatever I needed to know? Charlotte, riding alongside the commander, asked another question.

"Have many soldiers fallen victim to traps?"

"Not just soldiers. Experienced rangers, knights, and even mages often fall prey as well. It's fortunate if they only end up injured, but some victims of mental traps have their minds broken. That's why we're particularly cautious when exploring underground areas."

"Hmm… I see."

These were not traps in some remote dungeon, but in the Demon King's castle itself.

Charlotte couldn't help but gulp at the thought of dying or becoming permanently disabled by carelessly triggering one.

Even without considering Bertus's problem, the Demon King's castle wasn't a particularly safe place.

The commander had repeatedly warned that the underground areas were not properly secured and should be avoided.

But Charlotte, like me and Saviolin Turner, probably thought the same. If there were any clues, they would be in the underground area.

Soon, we arrived at the entrance to the grand and majestic Demon King's palace.

The girl who was thought to be a pitiable hostage kidnapped by the Demon King was, in fact, a princess. And she had immediately sensed the impending doom of her own

death upon being rescued.

She had returned with Dyrus, acquired a teleport scroll, and galloped with all her might to escape the clutches of the knights of the Salerian duchy.

Without me, Charlotte would have died.

I wonder what Charlotte is thinking now.

Is she thinking about the terror, pain, and terrible times she endured?

"…"

But the fleeting expression on Charlotte's face seemed full of sadness. It didn't seem like she was thinking about her anger and pain.

I know what she's thinking without having to ask.

She's thinking about Valier.

He had saved her but suddenly disappeared, and after briefly corresponding through letters, he had cut off contact himself.

Now she could only ponder his true identity amidst her anguish.

And here I am, by Charlotte's side as Reinhardt.

"Let's go in."

Charlotte, who had dismounted from her horse, spoke bravely.

The path leading to the inner courtyard of the Demon King's palace wasn't particularly complicated. It was just that the palace was so massive that we had to pass through long and wide corridors and several halls.

Signs of battle still remained within the castle.

"Of course… Your Highness knows this better than anyone… After the Demon King's

death, all the demonkind surrendered."

"I see."

As we walked, the commander pointed out the signs of battle in the grand halls within the palace.

"So the traces inside the palace mostly belong to the hero's party."

"Ah, I see."

The Demon King's castle had not been breached until his death.

And after the surrender, all battles had ceased, so there had been no fighting between the Demon King's army and the allied forces within the palace.

The broken furniture and statues, collapsed walls, and other traces were the results of the Demon King's forces and the hero's party clashing within the palace.

The commander explained various things as we walked through the palace.

His tone carried a sense of pride.

The great victory of humanity.

And the Demon King's castle was much like a museum commemorating that victory.

It seemed so, and that statement was not too far from the truth.

Standing in front of the collapsed wall of a massive hall that probably once served as a dining area, the commander spoke. He demonstrated a moment of silence right there.

A single white flower lay where he had paid his respects.

"Here, the body of Ragdina Olfi was found."

The place where the remains of one of the hero's party members were discovered.

After the Demon King's death, they would have recovered all the corpses, so the

bodies of the hero's party members would have been found scattered throughout the castle.

The locations where they had been found would have been recorded as well.

"And over there, the body of Archirion, one of the Four Heavenly Kings, was found along with hers."

Ragdina Olfi.

The one who had taken on the ranger position in the party.

I had never heard of Archirion, as I had not set up the Four Heavenly Kings myself.

What I had set up was the fact that as the hero party defeated each of the Four Heavenly Kings, one of them died in the process.

And in the end, only Ragan Artorius remained to face the Demon King.

Having them die one by one as they defeated each of the Four Heavenly Kings was a cliché in its own right, but I had never really given it any thought.

Perhaps there was a background to the Four Heavenly Kings each taking on the hero party one by one.

It was impossible to know now.

Saviolin Turner and Charlotte followed the commander, silently bowing their heads in tribute at the spot, as did I.

It couldn't exactly be called a tour, but the commander led us around as if it were his duty.

This time, it was not a hall but a massive corridor. There, too, a white flower that seemed recently placed lay.

It appeared that someone brought flowers here every day.

The pillars of the corridor had collapsed, and somewhere among the fallen pillars, the commander paid his respects once more.

"Here, the body of Mullerun, the mage of the hero party, was found."

"With the body of one of the Four Heavenly Kings, Succubus Queen Reina."

Succubus Queen Reina.

Airi's mother.

It was a name I had heard before, so it carried a weight that was far from insignificant.

The commander spoke quietly while staring at the traces of the collapse.

"Succubus Queen Reina was a very serious problem. On nights when she exerted her influence, tens of thousands of soldiers were too afraid to fall asleep due to her nightmare powers, and those who couldn't resist sleep often never woke up again."

He emphasized several times that the true terror of the Succubus Queen lay in the fact that her power was nightmares.

Although her power might not have been able to enter the minds of those with strong mental resistance or anti-magic training, countless soldiers without such resistance became unwitting victims of her nightmares.

"In fact, excluding Larken Simonstite, the Succubus Queen and her kind probably killed the most coalition soldiers."

Upon hearing the name Larken Simonstite, Saviolin Turner seemed to flinch slightly.

The commander spoke and walked ahead once more.

"Based on the circumstances, I believe the problem might have been the excessive amplification of magical power to save our companions from the powerful enchantment of the Succubus Queen…"

Commander Alfred visited the locations where the bodies of the hero's companions had been discovered, one by one.

Their original goal was to visit the place where Ragan Artorius and Demon King Valier had fought, but Charlotte had no particular comment on this.

Since the heroes had saved her life, she felt it was her duty to confirm the details.

After passing the place where the priest Sheridan had died, the commander sighed heavily when they reached the spot where the demon swordsman Seizaridia, presumed to be one of the last two standing alongside Ragan Artorius, had perished.

"Here, the bodies of the greatest demon, Larken Simonstite, and demon swordsman Seizaridia were found. It is presumed that the battle between Ragan Artorius and the Demon King took place immediately after."

Larken Simonstite.

I heard that both Airi and I had learned swordsmanship from him. I was a slacker, while Airi was an honor student.

Of course, I don't know much about him.

"……”

However, Saviolin Turner stared solemnly at the scene where an intense battle had undoubtedly taken place, her expression hardened.

"I wanted to kill that man with my own hands."

Saviolin Turner's fingers trembled slightly.

Neither Charlotte nor the commander said anything, as if they already knew.

It was obvious that I was the only one who didn't know why Saviolin Turner was saying such things.

Sensing my confusion, she looked at me and offered a bittersweet smile.

"He was my teacher."

“…What?!"

I couldn't help but be startled by the completely unexpected revelation. Charlotte and the commander stared at me, taken aback by my astonishment.

"You mean… you learned swordsmanship from a demon?"

"…?"

"Hmm?"

Saviolin Turner mumbled, folding her arms.

"It seems you didn't know. Well, it's possible you wouldn't… Larken Simonstite was human."

He was a human, ranked among the top four demon generals?

Wait, isn't it a big deal not knowing this? Fortunately, my humble background allowed me to let it pass.

My jaw dropped.

"A traitor of the empire who deserved to be torn apart."

A quiet rage burned in Saviolin Turner's eyes.

Come to think of it.

'Yes, the prince and princess learned swordsmanship from the first demon general, Sir Larken Simonstite.'

The title 'Sir.'

Upon reflection, it suited a knight, didn't it?

CHAPTER 350

Saviolin Turner briefly explained about Larken Simonstite.

Larken Simonstite had been the leader of the Shanafel squad when Saviolin Turner, now considerably older, was still a newcomer.

Just as Saviolin Turner is now, he too had held the title of the continent's strongest swordsman. Larken Simonstite taught Saviolin Turner many things to groom her as the next leader of the Shanafel squad.

After rigorous training that was so demanding that even the tremendous genius had to tear apart and rebuild everything she had learned at the temple, she eventually became the captain of the Shanafel's first knight squad.

At the time when Saviolin Turner was a newcomer, Larken Simonstite was already an old man who had passed his eighties. Although the aging process was slowed by the training and the manipulation of magical power, like Saviolin Turner, he had long surpassed the age for retirement.

Thus, he cultivated the next generation and, as Saviolin Turner's skills progressed, he handed over the leadership of the Shanafel squad to another and retired.

It wasn't a strange occurrence. Everyone believed he was living a quiet life after retirement.

As the sense of crisis from the Demon World War intensified, the empire needed strength, and they sought to borrow the retired Grandmaster's hand as well.

However.

Unexpectedly, Larken Simonstite had become one of the Four Heavenly Kings of the Demon Army, holding the heavy title of the first Heavenly King.

One of the Heavenly Kings was a human, and they knew nothing about it. Moreover, he was even a mentor to Saviolin Turner.

In the original work, even the dead Demon King wasn't mentioned much, so there was no reason to mention the Heavenly Kings. There had been no reason to discuss the Heavenly Kings during their time in this world, although the Demon King was occasionally mentioned.

So, it was rather an odd situation where everyone else knew almost everything, but I didn't.

"Why did he become one of the Four Heavenly Kings of Darkland…?"

"I don't know."

Saviolin Turner shook her head.

"We may never know."

She was set up as a character who felt guilty for not participating in the Demon World War. However, there was a hidden backstory that I was unaware of.

Why did Larken Simonstite betray humanity and join the Darkland side?

Would Sarkegaar, Loyar, or Eleris possibly know?

I had never asked questions related to the Heavenly Kings because I wasn't initially curious, but now that I had heard it, I became curious about the stories of the Heavenly Kings that no longer existed in this world.

Still, considering he had received the first Heavenly King's position and even taught Airi swordsmanship, it seemed like he had been treated well and lived comfortably in Darkland.

Saviolin Turner had many questions for the traitorous Larken, but she ultimately could not head to Darkland under the pretext of protecting the royal family.

So, it was inevitable that arriving at the Demon King's castle now that everything had ended would be bittersweet.

We walked further and finally reached our intended destination.

The very center of the Demon King's castle.

A desolate, ruined plaza.

Even after the battle had ended, there must have been rain and snow, but the traces of the battle did not disappear easily, as the place had witnessed such an overwhelming fight.

"This is where humanity achieved its final victory."

The site of the battle between the Demon King and the hero.

All the pillars and statues had been destroyed, and the ground was deeply hollowed out.

Despite the vast expanse of the area, traces of the intense battle could be found everywhere, and the walls of the Demon King's palace nearby had been torn away or showed signs of collapse.

“…It's hard to believe that this scene was the result of a battle between only two beings."

Even Saviolin Turner, who was currently considered the strongest being in the world, seemed to be taken aback.

"No matter how many times I see it, I can't even imagine how powerful the Demon King was… and the same goes for the strength of Artorius who faced him."

We walked towards the center of the battlefield.

"To think that Ragan Artorius was… this powerful."

Saviolin Turner seemed to be shocked for a different reason.

No matter how great Ragan Artorius was, he was not yet thirty years old.

He had killed a retired Grandmaster and defeated the Demon King, all with a strong group of companions. Saviolin Turner seemed to be starting to wonder if that was even possible.

"The remains of the Demon King could not be found due to the intensity of the battle, but Artorius was discovered here, with his sword Alsebringer plunged into the

ground, looking as if he were merely sleeping…”

I didn't witness the fight, and I didn't describe it, but I know the truth.

It wasn't Ragan Artorius' strength that defeated the Demon King, at least not alone.

It was the power of Alsebringer.

Nobody but me knows the true purpose of Alsebringer.

The war god, Als.

Alsebringer.

It is, quite literally, a sword that can summon the war god.

From the beginning, it was Ragan Artorius, who had become the embodiment of Als, who fought the Demon King.

The price was his life.

Artorius had killed the Demon King at the cost of his own life.

Ludwig became the owner of Alsebringer.

In the original development of the story, Ludwig eventually used the true power of Alsebringer.

So…

As a tragic romantic, I ended up doing the crazy deed of killing the protagonist in a novel that started as a daily life story.

Charlotte decided that guiding was enough and sent the commander back.

From now on, stories that he should not hear would begin to unfold. She was allowed to roam the upper levels, but he sternly warned her never to go to the basement before leaving.

There were soldiers in the Demon King's palace, but not many. If they were around, they were likely focusing on searching the basement.

The commander had told us many things, but we hadn't come to tour the turning point in human history, but to find a clue to improve Charlotte's condition.

"Your Highness, do you feel anything?"

“…Nothing at all."

The place where the Demon King had died.

Charlotte arrived there, but it seemed as if she couldn't feel anything.

After all, it was just a place they had come to without much thought. There were no remains of the Demon King's corpse, and if there was such a thing as the Demon King's soul, it was far too uncertain to hope that it would still linger here.

More than anything, too much time had passed. The place had once been the site of a great battle, but there was nothing left other than the traces of that conflict.

"I guess we have no choice but to hope that there's something underground."

"But… it seems quite dangerous, more than we expected."

"Sigh, you're right."

It wasn't just the traps that would activate when stepped on; there were even spells that attacked the mind.

"Let's start by exploring the surface. There might be something up above as well."

There was nothing to be gained from the site of the final battle.

However, the Demon King's palace was vast.

Asserting that there were plenty of areas to explore even if it wasn't the underground, Charlotte took the lead.

Her memories of the Demon King's castle were not very clear.

The situation had been so urgent, and after meeting Charlotte, time had flown by like a storm. There was no room in her heart for anything else; it was as if she was sprinting across thin ice, constantly fearing that one misstep would lead to death.

Her state of extreme psychological stress certainly played a part in this.

"We should have brought Dyrus with us," Saviolin Turner murmured.

"Hmm… I don't think it's a place with fond memories for Sir Dyrus either, so I didn't see the need to bring him along."

"You're right."

Like me, Charlotte's memories of the Demon King's castle were likely hazy. After all, she had spent most of her time imprisoned there.

For Charlotte, the Demon King's castle held nothing but terrible memories, incomparable to those of Dyrus or me. Horrifying experiences, and eventually, the awakening of her strange powers that killed everyone in the prison.

The shock of cannibalism.

Despair, fear, and revulsion that came with it.

In the end, Charlotte had killed not only her mother but everyone else who was imprisoned with her.

It was impossible to tell if Charlotte was thinking about her past trauma. She simply walked silently through the corridors of the Demon King's palace.

I, too, found the experience to be quite new.

I wasn't being chased by anyone, nor was my life in danger.

While I wasn't completely at ease, I had the luxury of observing the Demon King's castle.

The ceilings of the corridors were high, and the passageways were spacious overall.

I had seen various palaces before.

From the Spring Palace to the Central Palace Tetra, the White Palace Arunaria, and even the Fortress Epiaux.

Yet, the Demon King's castle had ceilings and passageways that were excessively large and spacious.

"The scale is truly immense. I wonder if there's really a need for it to be this vast…"

Saviolin Turner murmured, seemingly sharing my thoughts.

"It's not for humans to walk through."

The one who answered wasn't me, the Demon Prince, but Charlotte.

"Ah."

"…Right?"

No.

I should have known, but hearing it from Charlotte made me feel incredibly foolish.

I am unaware, as I am not actually a prince of the demon clan!

It was reasonable for the structures to be built on a larger scale, as there were likely some demons who were bigger or more massive than normal.

I wondered if the spaces were big enough for even ogres to move around freely.

Of course, not all rooms were large enough for those enormous beings to pass through easily.

Throughout the hallways, there were traces of destroyed statues. The broken pieces had been removed, but from the size of the wall carvings, one could guess that there had once been considerably large statues.

Charlotte stopped in front of them.

"What are these…"

"What's the matter?"

"…I just remembered something Dyrus told me."

Charlotte glanced at the shattered statue.

"Dyrus and… uh… um…"

Charlotte attempted to say 'that child' but hesitated and closed her mouth after noticing my expression.

Perhaps she felt sorry for bringing up Valier again after promising to forget about him.

I wondered why she needed to be so considerate of my feelings.

"Ahem. Anyway, I came into the Demon King's palace and obtained a teleport scroll to rescue you. But when I tried to leave the palace, I was ambushed by knights from the Salerian Duchy Family to silence me."

"…I see."

It seemed like this was the first time Charlotte had told Lady Saviolin Turner about the events that had transpired in the Demon King's castle.

"Back then, the gargoyles suddenly became active and attacked the knights. That's how I managed to escape safely…"

The memory was vivid in my mind.

The Salerian knights had intended to kill us, and I had thought about the gargoyles in that moment.

Typically, in such situations.

Things like that moved.

With a feeling like that.

As if responding to my thoughts, the gargoyles activated and attacked the knights, killing one on the spot.

"So that's why all the statues were destroyed."

Charlotte seemed to conclude that after the incident, all statues were destroyed, and these were the remnants.

"…"

Lady Saviolin Turner silently looked down.

She had vowed to maintain political neutrality.

However, the fact that she was nearly killed by Bertus's minions after enduring various hardships in the Demon King's castle must have stirred intense emotions within her.

Of course, it wasn't her first time hearing about it, and she likely already knew.

But hearing it directly from Charlotte while revisiting the scene seemed to cause her expression to twist as she tried to suppress her emotions.

From the beginning, her neutrality was questionable.

Even though it was for the survival of the First Princess, the act of trying to save Charlotte's life couldn't possibly be considered neutral.

Lady Saviolin could distance herself from Charlotte's issues once her safety was assured, but that time had not yet come.

Her neutrality had already wavered, and it was clear that the heinous acts attempted by Bertus further shook her resolve.

Both her experiences in the Demon King's castle and the fact that she couldn't escape the aftereffects of those events, forced her to return to the dreadful memories within the castle.

It seemed that Saviolin Turner's heart was inclined towards Charlotte, if only out of sympathy for her unfortunate situation.

Turner struggled with the conflict between his belief in maintaining neutrality and his growing feelings for Charlotte.

"It's alright, Lady Turner,"

Charlotte said quietly as she walked ahead.

"If our situations were reversed, I would have done the same thing that Bertus tried to do to me."

"…"

Charlotte spoke those words calmly.

"I knew what would happen to me from the beginning, after all."

In the end, they were all the same.

Bertus wasn't inherently bad; it was just that his actions were fitting for the circumstances.

"So, there's no need to pity me so much."

"……I apologize, Your Highness."

As Charlotte spoke, she slowly walked down the corridor.

She neither defended Bertus nor demeaned herself.

Her words were simply meant to ease the psychological burden that Saviolin Turner was feeling.

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